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Sarojini Naidu

Padmini Sen Gupta

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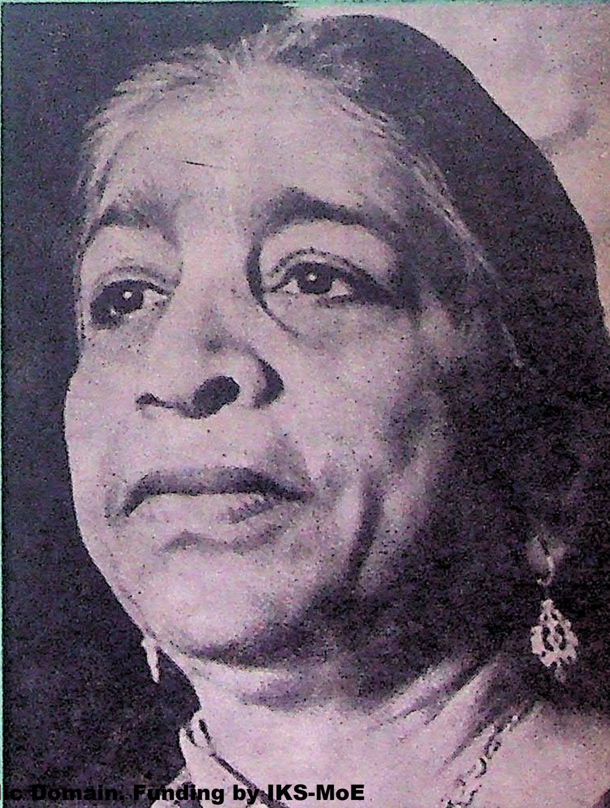

Makers of
Indian
Literature

SAROJINI NAIDU (1879—1949) curved herself a niche in the annals of English poetry, not as an Indian writing in English but as one to whom English came as the most natural medium. Sarojini was however, no alien to India and wrote about her country with the pen of a pure Indian, a patriotic daughter, who was an integral part of her great nation.

She was a child of the Hindu-Muslim structure of Hyderabad with a strong background of Brahmo philosophy, tolerance and love for humanity. Being herself a product of the English-speaking system of education, she deplored the denationalised Indian youth for their blind intellectual bondage to the West. Yet she was taught from earliest childhood to believe in East-West comradeship.

Sarojini always reminded us that there was the moon for us to reach, the sky was our limit, and we were to work for the good of a united world.

Sarojini Naidu is truly called the Nightingale of India, whose golden voice still vibrates in the ears of those who had an opportunity to listen to any of her eloquent speeches.

This monograph by Srimati Padmini Sengupta, who knew Sarojini as a friend of her illustrious mother, is an attempt to introduce the *Bharat Kokila* to the general Indian readers, who may have known something of Sarojini Naidu as a politician but not so much as a poet.

The sculpture reproduced on the end-paper is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India. From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D. Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

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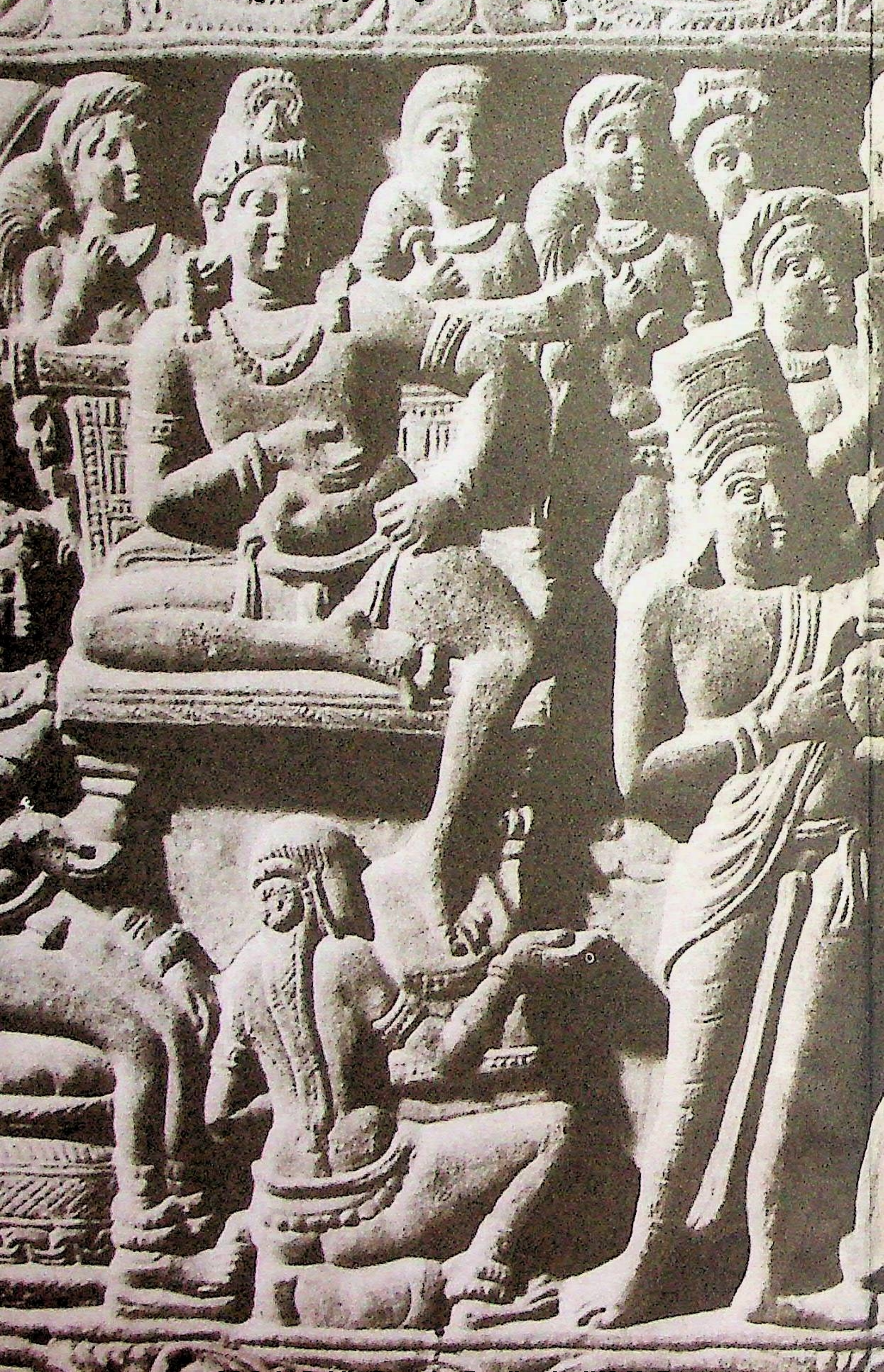

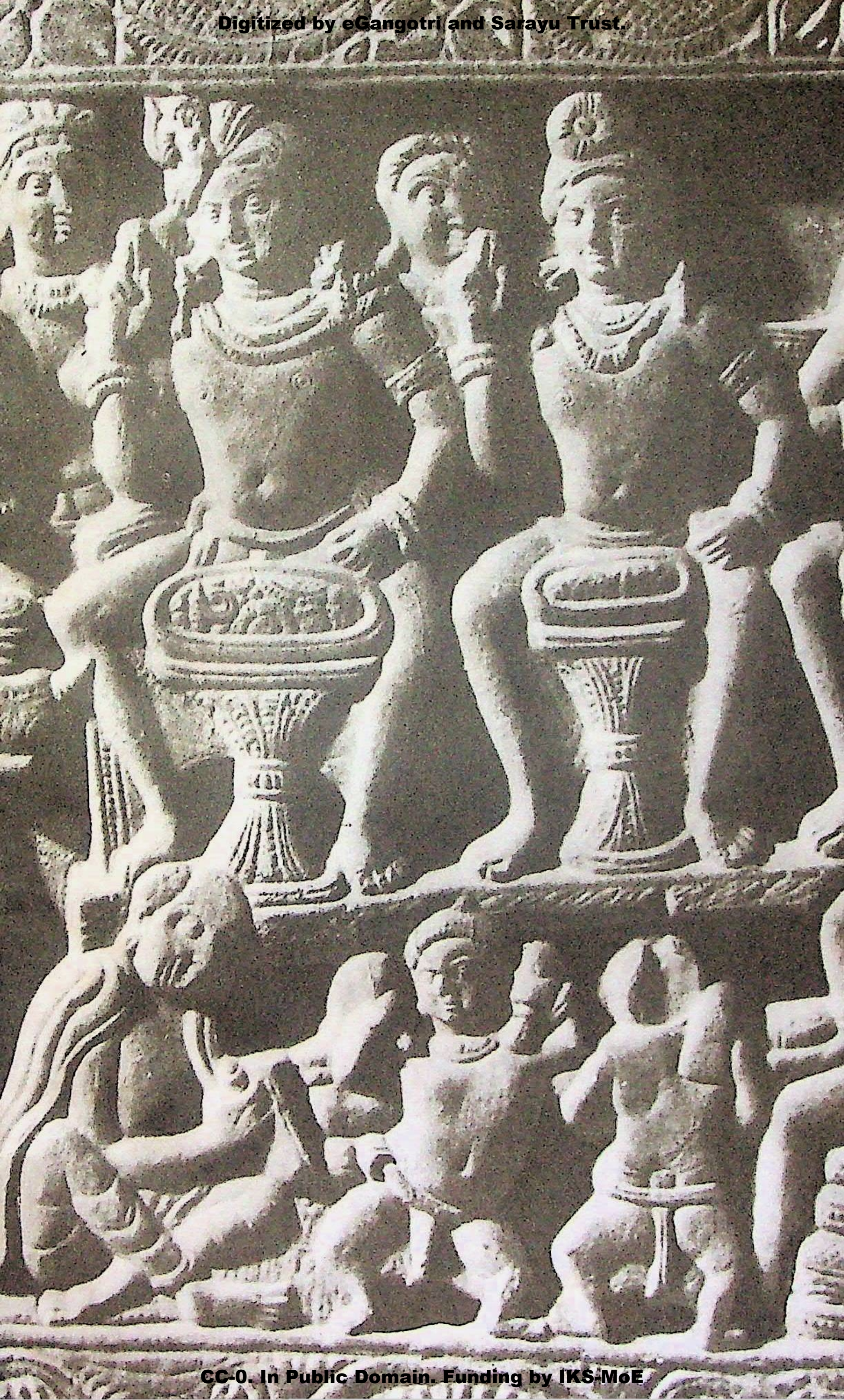

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

SAROJINI NAIDU

PADMINI SENGUPTA

SAHITYA AKADEMI
NEW DELHI

The Magical Wood

SAROJINI inherited fully the dream-world in which her father and to a certain extent her mother existed. 'My ancestors for thousands of years have been lovers of the forest and the mountain caves, great dreamers, great scholars, great ascetics. My father is a dreamer himself, a great dreamer, a great man whose life has been a magnificent failure.'[1] And it is in the manner of dreams, admitting that we are 'such stuff as dreams are made of', that any study of Sarojini Naidu's literary output can be judged. Too much ink, perhaps, has been wasted in striving to create out of Sarojini Naidu a profound poet, a thinker, a philosopher though glimpses of all these and even mysticism are revealed in her songs. But she is ephemeral, and her lyrics are as light as the burden which the palanquin bearers in her poem of that name bore as passing beautiful as 'a flower', 'a bird', 'a laugh', 'a star', 'a beam on the brow of a tide', 'a tear'.

This realm of fantasy and allegoric idealism are as beautiful as the fairies in Midsummer Night's Dream. Cobweb Moth and Mustard Seed—airy fairy beings ; small, delicate lovely and insubstantial. And Sarojini Naidu stands rather aloof and alone in this dream-world of delight and also sadness and grief, for she, except in her poems and a prose-poem she wrote as early as 1902, could not share her fairy world really with the politics and grey Congress realm into which she emerged. Her other self of fancies and dreams kept her really a separate figure from the fighters of the freedom struggle, though she was very much a part of them, for always, with their sombre whites and austere Gandhian aspects, Sarojini shone in coloured splendour, laughter-laden and free. And therefore among her first poems was The Song of A Dream :

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[1] *The Golden Threshold* p. 14

> ‘Once in the dream of a night I stood
> Lone in the light of a magical wood,
> Soul-deep in visions that poppy-like sprang ;
> And spirits of Truth were the birds that sang,
> And spirits of Love were the stars that glowed,
> And spirits of Peace were the streams that flowed
> In that magical wood in the land of sleep.
>
> Lone in the light of that magical grove,
> I felt the stars of the spirit of Love
> Gather and gleam round my delicate youth,
> And I heard the song of the spirits of Truth ;
> To quench my longing I bent me low
> By the streams of the spirits of Peace that flow
> In that magical wood in the land of sleep.’

This poem was written when Sarojini was studying at Girton College, Cambridge as a girl of seventeen and was first published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1901.

One of the most beautiful dream-pictures Sarojini drew was, strangely enough, not in a poem but a prose-fantasy called ‘Nilambuja’ in 1902. This prose-poem followed the pattern of romanticism and idealism which almost all her poems depict, and in which atmosphere Sarojini spent so much of her girlhood and even early married womanhood. One wishes that Sarojini had indulged more in prose-poems for her words, though they cascaded in torrents of rhymes and rhythms in her poetry, are here free of the double-syllabled rumti-tum of her verses, which at times became monotonous. In ‘Nilambuja’ Sarojini was exempt from the trammels of the rules and regulations of English poetry-writing of her variety and age.

‘Nilambuja’ was published in the *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1902, and few have heard of it, though it has also appeared in a book of collected speeches published by Natesan.[2] Here is also revealed her lonely soul which as a young girl walks

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[2] *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, p. 1st seq.

'alone on the shores of a lake that shone like a fire-opel in its ring of onyx-coloured hills'. Here in 'slumbrous rhythm' she moves, keeping perfect time with 'the cadence of the waters.'

The figure is strangely attractive and interweaves the colour and beauty enfolded in the heart of a girl together with her ideals. She watches the stars 'till she has caught from their inaccessible fires the soaring flame of her manifold enthusiasm, a myriad-hearted passion for humanity, for knowledge, for life, above all, for the eternal beauty of the universe.' Here was Sarojini Naidu, herself a girl of 23, married four years, a proud mother, a happy wife, enriched with an exotic fragrance of life in England and Italy, back home to serve and sing. Here was a bud blossoming into flower, its petals opening their delicate beauty to the warm glow of the golden sun.

'Thenceforth, she had moved in the shadow of perpetual mystery, consumed with a deep intelectual hunger, an unquenchable spiritual thirst. Forever seeking the ecstasy of beauty in the voice of the winds and the waters, in the ethereal glory of dawn upon the mountains, in the uttered souls of poets and prophets, the dreamers and teachers of all ages and every race'.

'Nilambuja' is the fantasy of Sarojini when she was first stepping out into the world. Her background of life in Hyderabad, the silver and gold and rainbow hues of her society, which indulged in a purdah world within palaces and luxurious domestic walls, and outside, the bright sun, the songs of birds, and scarlet and rose and orange of blossom-laden gardens, of vistas of ambitions and programmes of active constructive work, suffuses this fantasy. In Sarojini's prose-poem a girl treads the world alone. She is beautiful, her lovely eyes flashing from her 'sensitive oval face', revealing the 'lyric soul within'. Clothed in purple and gold, with passion flowers enclosing her coiled black tresses, 'Nilambuja' leaves the shore of the lake and threads her way to a garden 'of oleanders and pomegranate trees'. The hall is dimly visible and

Girlhood

SAROJINI was born on February 13, 1879. She was the eldest of eight children.

Edmund Gosse, in his introduction to the *Bird of Time*, Sarojini's second published book of verse says : 'She has lived—and this is another facet of her eminent career—in close companionship with sorrow ; she has known the joy and also the despair of consolation. The sight of much suffering, it may be, has thinned her jasmine-garlands and darkened the azure of her sky'. Her sorrows seem to have started with her brother's death. She later suffered many tragedies, and one wonders why these events did not induce Sarojini to write more weighty poems, such as for instance, on Gokhale's death, but she merely wrote a much quoted and appreciated but nevertheless slight poem on the death of so great a man and so staunch a friend of her's. Often, she wrote of her children and her sisters or her friends, but they are all clothed in a veil of lyric inconsequence, often explaining their names or romanticising their lives.

Sarojini was the beloved daughter of Aghorenath Chattopadhyay or Chatterjee as he first called himself, who came from Brahmanagar, a village in East Bengal, and Varada Sundari. Apart from Aghorenath claiming a heritage of scholarship from his ancestors, they were lovers of nature and forest meditators. Even though Sarojini says that her father's life was a magnificent failure, his achievements were by no means small. He was a master of Sanskrit and widely read in the literature of East and West. He was a scholar in English and Hebrew, French, German and Russian. His motto was to learn something new each day. In Calcutta, he came in contact with Keshab Chandra Sen and joined the Naba Bidhan cult of Brahmoism. His wife was one of the first inmates of the Bharat Ashram, which Keshab Chandra Sen started.

Aghorenath's favourite subject was Chemistry, which led him later to become an ardent alchemist striving with his friends to find a formula, sitting over cauldrons and working late into the night in an old gymnasium in Hyderabad, striving to turn the baser metals into gold. Sarojini writes, 'Oh, dear, night and day the experiments are going on, and everyman who brings a new prescription is welcome as a brother. But this alchemy is, you know, only the material counterpart of a poet's craving for Beauty, the eternal Beauty. The makers of gold and the makers of verse, they are the twin creators that sway the world's secret desire for mystery ; and what in my father is the genius of curiosity—in me is the desire for beauty'.[1]

Aghorenath went abroad on a scholarship in Chemistry before settling in Hyderabad. He took his Doctor of Science at the Edinburgh University in 1877. When he returned to India he was invited to Hyderabad, Deccan in 1878 where he established a school with the English medium. Aghorenath then founded the Hyderabad College and was appointed its Principal. This later became the Nizam's College. Soon, with his wife's help, Aghorenath began to take an interest in women's education. With the co-operation of other women, the girl's college was inaugurated as a part of the Osmania University. Aghorenath was against the caste system and child marriage. His services were much appreciated in Hyderabad for many years, but he became involved in politics and was suspended from service and deported from Hyderabad for a short time. A few years later, he was recalled as Principal, Nizam's College. He was responsible for the introduction of the Special Marriage Act of British India in Hyderabad. From 1885 he took an active part in the Indian National Congress from its very inception.

Sarojini's girlhood home in Hyderabad was, according to a description given by her poet brother, 'a museum of wisdom and culture, a zoo crowded with a medley of strange types—some even verging on the mystic, for our home was open to all alike'.[2]

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[1] *The Golden Threshold* p. 15

Lavish hospitality was displayed in his home. A glimpse of the generous welcome that awaited one and all is shown in Sarojini's letter to Arthur Symons in the introduction by him of *The Golden Threshold*. Sarojini invites her sponsor to her home. 'Come and share my exquisite March morning with me : this sumptuous blaze of gold and sapphire sky ; these scarlet lilies that adore the sunshine ; the voluptuous scents of neem and champak and serisha that beat upon the languid air with their implacable sweetness ; the thousand little gold and blue and silver breasted birds bursting with the shrill ecstasy of life in nesting time. All is hot and fierce and passionate, ardent and unashamed in its exulting and importunate desire for life and love. And, do you know that the scarlet lilies are woven petal by petal from my heart's blood, these little quivering birds are my soul made incarnate music, these heavy perfumes are my emotions dissolved into aerial essence, this flaming blue and gold sky is the 'very me', that part of me that incessantly and insolently, yes, and a little deliberately, triumphs over that other part—a thing of nerves and tissues that suffers and cries out, and that must die tomorrow perhaps, or twenty years hence'.[3] Always there is that cry of pain, in her letters and poetry, and those of us who knew her personally were aware of her constant ill-health, which she overcame gallantly to live an arduous life of stress and strain until she was 70. But here again, the exquisite prose of her letters seems too scarce. We wish that Sarojini had written more prose.

This letter to Arthur Symons was from her married home, *The Golden Threshold*, after which her first book of verse was named. Her girlhood home was as romantic and full of colour and song. Her mother, Varada Sundari's kitchen was always replete with food and guests were served with all the exotic

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2. *Life and Myself* by Harindranath Chattopadhyay p. 15
3. *The Golden Threshold* pp. 17 & 18

cooking of Hindu and Muslim and Western recipes and delicious sweets. It was no wonder that Sarojini herself loved cooking and became an epicure in later years. Servants abounded in her home and were deeply attached to the family.

Sarojini's parents spoke to each other in Bengali but to their children in Hindustani and to the servants in Telugu. Varada Sundari is said to have known many languages, and Sarojini's eldest brother Virendranath was master of 16 tongues. Sarojini, until her father's insistence on her learning English, had no wish to learn it. He actually punished her by shutting her up in a room for a whole day because she refused to speak English. Sarojini seemed to have taken the punishment as a welcome one, for from that day, she determined to obey her father and not only speak English, but to become really proficient in the language. She adhered so stubbornly to this resolution, that she wrote in no other language but English though she was fluent in Urdu. On the whole English must have been easier to speak than an Indian language for The Chattopadhyay family were Bengalis settled in a Telugu country, and as has been seen, four languages were used in the household ; Bengali between the parents, but English with the children, Telugu with the servants, and Hindustani with of course Urdu, and English among visitors to the house. Sarojini comments on her life thus at this time : 'I don't think I had any special hankering to write poetry as a little child, though I was of a very fanciful and dreamy nature. My training under my father's eye was of a serious and scientific character. He was determined that I should be a great mathematician or a scientist, but the poetic instinct which I inherited from him and also from my mother (who wrote some lovely Bengali lyrics in her youth) proved stronger. One day, when I was eleven, I was sighing over a sum in Algebra ; it wouldn't come right : but instead a whole poem came to me suddenly. I wrote it down. From that day my 'poetic career' began. At thirteen I wrote a long poem '*a la* Lady of the Lake'—1,300 lines in six days. At thirteen I wrote a drama of 2,000 lines, a full-fledged passionate thing that I began on the spur of the moment without forethought, just to spite my doctor who said I was very ill and must not touch a book. My health broke down permanently about this time, and my regular studies being stopped I read voraciously. I suppose the greater part of my reading was done between fourteen and sixteen. I wrote a novel, I wrote volumes of Journals : I took myself very seriously in those days'.[4]

Aghorenath recognised Sarojini's exceptional intellect when she was still a girl and he was determined that she should matriculate. There was no suitable school for girls to study in Hyderabad and she was sent to Madras where she passed the matriculation when she was only 12, gaining a first class first in the Madras University, which in those days covered the whole of the Southern peninsula. Neither was the examination easy in 1891, and girls were not expected to attend higher classes. Her success caused astonishment and fame throughout India ; but she disliked publicity and confessed to Arthur Symons, 'Honestly I was not pleased ; such things did not happen to me.'

One of the enigmás of Sarojini's career was, however, that she never again passed or even tried to sit for an academic examination. Just as she abandoned writing narrative poems of any length, novels and journals, she eschewed examinations, and veered her life into writing lyrics and later steeped herself only in political activities even abandoning poetry. Though she later attended King's College, London and Girton, Cambridge, she returned to India without a degree at the age of 18. But her reading in English Literature and her contact with the literary world in London was of far greater value than mere academic distinction. Later she became a member of the Royal Literary Society and was conferred the degree of Doctorate by many universities.

After passing the matriculation, Sarojini returned to Hyderabad and stayed in her parental home from 1892 to 1895.

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[4] *The Golden Threshold* pp. 11. & 12

These were also among the happiest years of Sarojini's life where she indulged in wide reading and exulted in the happy home life provided by her parents and the expansive circle of friends of all kinds, creeds, races, and classes.

Sarojini now first ventured into writing poetry, though she had, already at 11 written '*a la* Lady of the Lake'. All her published poems later, however, were short and lyrical. She never ventured on a ballad or even varied her form to write sonnets.

From the age of 13 to 15 she wrote a number of verses published privately by her father.[5] They reveal a precocious and mature mind, but are very slight and effervescent.

In 1896 Sarojini was sent away to England. Dr. Naidu's proclamation of love for her and his formal request to marry her seem to have been the main cause for this hasty move. Two reasons motivated Sarojini's parents in disallowing the marriage with Dr. Naidu. They were her extremely young years—she was but sixteen—and Aghorenath was against child marriage. Also, Dr. Naidu was widower and about ten years her senior. The second reason was that Sarojini's suitor was of a lower caste, but this could hardly have been of importance, for she was allowed to marry on her return from England in 1898 the very same man who was rejected by Aghornath three years earlier. It must also be remembered by those who have declared that Aghornath objected to intercaste marriages that he himself was an ardent reformer and worked towards the abolition of caste. The Nizam granted a welcome scholarship to Sarojini and she was shipped abroad in September 1895 for further studies.

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[5] *Poems* by Miss S. Chattopadhyay, 3rd October 1896, published by Aghornath Chattopadhyaya. These early poems are a collection of verses written between 1892-1896

The English Scene

IN 1895, an Indian girl, who was no older than 16 burst upon the English scene and took the staid Victorian drawing rooms by storm. She awoke not only an ingrown insular people but even the conventional prosaic English critics of poetry to a sudden awareness of the beauty and genius lying dormant in the vast Indian sub-continent which the British ruled.

When Sarojini was introduced to Edmund Gosse, 'she was', as he said later, 'a child of sixteen, but as unlike the usual English maiden of that age as a lotus or a cactus is unlike a lily of the valley. She was already marvellous in mental maturity, amazingly well-read and far beyond a Western child in all her acquaintance with the world'.[1]

Arthur Symons, the other contemporary Englishman of letters who sponsored her, says that Sarojini read her first poems to him in 1896. 'She sat in our midst, and judged us, and few knew what was passing behind her face 'like an awakening soul' to use one of her own epithets. Her eyes were like deep pools, and you seemed to fall through them into depths below depths.'[2]

Edmund Gosse continues: 'By some accident—now forgotten, but an accident most fortunate for us—Sarojini was introduced to our home at an early date after her arrival in London, and she soon became one of the most welcome and intimate of our guests. It was natural that one so impetuous and so sympathetic should not long conceal from her hosts that she was writing copiously in verse—in English verse.'

It was one of Sarojini's fellow students who introduced the young Indian poetess to Edmund Gosse in order to give her a

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1. *The Bird of Time* pp. 3. & 4
2. *The Golden Threshold* p. 23

chance to meet a leading figure in the English literature scene. And from thence on, the encouragement which Sarojini got was such that she not only dedicated the next twenty years of her life to writing poetry, but to write in English, introducing an exotic oriental world to the English speaking world. This seemed to be her ardent mission.

Sarojini first started her studies in London at King's College. Later she went to Girton, Cambridge, but she seemed to have lost all desire to achieve any form of academic qualification. In Cambridge, she often avoided the lecture hall and dreamt the time away in the beautiful adjoining woods, and here, she began to write of the English countryside, and of that lovely country's flowers and birds for which she was almost heartlessly criticised by Edmund Gosse.

One regrets the fact that the style of these early poems, devoid of nationality or any form of artificial taboo, were stilled almost forever by her critic who asked her to write of things Indian, which stemmed her instincts so early. Here, she was subjective. When she started her Indian lyrics, she became objective. But as early as 1896 Sarojini dedicated herself to poetry and she also realised that despite her denial later to Arthur Symons that she was no great poet, she was nevertheless conscious enough to call this poem 'The Poet's Love Song'. She became so ardent and her soul kept fleeing on the wings of song so rapidly that her health began to break down. Speeding away with the wind and the waves, she 'burnt the dear dreams that are dead', and in the shady woods of Cambridge she strove to escape from the 'wars of the world and the strife of the throng'. She was now determined to 'Conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song', and like a mystic she was able to forget her separations and pain in the glowing delight of her lyrics.

Sarojini used to dress in 'clinging silks' in England. She was petite and wore her hair loose 'straight down her back'. Symons says she could have been taken for a child. 'She spoke little and in a low voice, like gentle music ; and she seemed, wherever she was, to be alone'.[3] Her over-emotional nature seemed to have been suffering from a great strain at the time and it was suggested that she may have undergone a slight nervous break-down. She was sent to Switzerland and from there on to Italy. This country enthralled her and she asked 'Is this a country of men or of Gods ?' 'Is this earth or heaven ?' Her colourful romantic magical prose comes into full play once more. 'This Italy is made of gold of dawn and daylight, the gold of the stars, and now dancing in weird enchanting rhythms through this magic month of May the gold of fireflies in the perfumed darkness—'serial gold'. I long to catch the subtle music of their fairy dances and make a poem with the rhythm like the quick irregular wild flash of their sudden movements. Would it not be wonderful ? One black night I stood in a garden with fireflies in my hair like darting restless stars caught in a mesh of darkness. It gave me a strange sensation, as if I were not human at all, but an elfin spirit'. Words and words, how she exulted in them. She drank in the beauty of Italy like wine. 'God ! how beautiful it is, and how glad I am that I am alive today !'

Thus this 'child of seventeen' existed in Europe drunk in ecstasy on 'large draughts of intellectual day'. A strange and fascinating girl who listened to other people's troubles patiently and yet seemed to suffer herself from some mental emotion which agitated her so much that her health broke down. But she 'possessed a passionate tranquillity of mind, before which everything mean and trivial and temporary caught fire and burnt away in smoke'. Symons says : 'Along with this wisdom, as of age or of the age of the race, there was what I can hardly call less than an agony of sensation.' Pain or pleasure wafted her into other worlds of emotion and she could easily be hurt by the mere 'frown of a friend'. A mystic romantic child indeed, that caused not only a sensation abroad but left a lasting loveable picture of a child of the Orient aglow with the magic of the East. This magic consisted to a great extent in the play of her words, always pouring forth in torrents of beautiful phrases in her poetry, for 'she spoke little' in company, which cast, along with her own exquisite beauty and secret world of longing, a spell upon the English scene which carried her into premature fame in the annals of English writing.

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[3] *The Golden Threshold* p. 16

Back Home

ENGLAND formed a deep impression on Sarojini and confirmed her choice of English as the medium she would use for her poetry. The encouragement which she received from the critics and men of letters of the time, and the inspiration they had instilled in her to interpret India to the West was now a confirmed ambition. Not in vain had Edmund Gosse advised her to be no longer 'Falsely English'. Despite having mastered the English language and the 'prosody of the West' she was no longer to write about England and its countryside, which must be foreign to her Indian eyes. He says: 'The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me were skilled in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment; but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery, they were founded on reminescences of Tennyson and Shelley; I am not sure that they did not even breathe an atmosphere of Christian resignation. I laid them down in despair; this was but the note of the mocking bird with a vengeance'.[1] He then gave his pupil his famous verdict and forbade her to write of English robins and skylarks and to abandon a 'rechauffé of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting' and give some 'revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion of the principle of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had soul'.

Why was Gosse so vociferous against an Indian writing about England? Were not numbers of his countrymen of the time including Edwin Arnold, Meadows Taylor and others writing about India? A poet cannot be wholly national and nothing else. World thought and movements have to form part of the themes. Perhaps this was why Sarojini's poems are slight, because her stage has not merely India but a very limited woman's world with folk music and poems on great men like Buddha or Gokhale or Gandhi thrown in. But so absorbed did she become on returning home in interpreting India to the West—especially her Hyderabad Muslim-Hindu world, that her eyes seemed to have been closed to everything else. Even her patriotic verses later were slight, though she was immersed in real life in the tragedies and sorrows of the Gandhian freedom struggle. Her call to women to arise and her other few patriotic verses are neither deep nor really touching except for their lovely words. Her philosophy to 'conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song' was not really convincing, for she never touched this devotion at the depth of a Mira Bai or an Andal. Like a butterfly, she sipped desultorily at the nectar of the flower passing from one to the other in songs with which she revealed just the kind of world to the West which they fancied, *A world of exotic Eastern romance*.

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[1] *The Birds of Time* p. 4

When Sarojini returned home in September 1898, her first concern was to marry the man she loved, and for whom she had longed these last three years. Her marriage was the foundation of many a reform in India, for it was intercaste and inter-provincial and helped to loosen many an old inhibition which had hitherto stifled free life in the subcontinent. The Special Marriage Act (Act III of 1872) now came into use. Both the parties had to deny that they were of any religion, such as Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Muslim or Jain. The Marriage took place in Madras on December 2, 1898, and the following interesting notice was published in an Indian Newspaper: 'Mrs. Ram Mohan Roy, a Brahmo lady of culture and refinement, acted as the bridesmaid and added grace and beauty to the solemnity of the occasion. The ceremony opened with a prayer by Mr. S. Somasundaram Pillai, B. A.; and after the prescribed rituals had been gone through, Rao Bahadur Veerasalingam Naidu

Garu officiated as the Minister for the sacred occasion. After the Minister's charge to the happy couple regarding the responsibilities of life, Dr. Aghorenath gave away the bride and united the pair in holy wedlock in due form, the marriage being solemnised in the presence of Mr. F. D. Bird, the Registrar of Marriages of Madras town.' The couple was blessed by Pandit Veerasalingam Pantulu Garu, who was a leading South Indian reformer of the time.

Sarojini now settled down happily as a young and romantic bride in Hyderabad, and in 1901 her first child, Jayasurya was born, to be followed in the next three years by Padmaja, Ranadhira and Leilamani. Sarojini's home became famous for its lavish hospitality to friends from all parts of the world and here she lived for the first few years of her married life with the sound of children's laughter and abounding love enriching her life. Many of her early poems depict this phase of her life, when she sang of home and children and of Hyderabad, the city she loved.

She wrote to Arthur Symons : "I have taught myself to be commonplace and like everybody else superficial. Everyone thinks I am so nice and cheerful, so 'brave', all the banal things that are so comfortable to be. My mother knows me only 'as such a tranquil child'. ...I too have learnt the subtle philosophy of living from moment to moment. Yes, it is a subtle philosophy though it appears merely an epicurean doctrine : 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die !" But she also possessed a slightly morbid strain, due certainly to her ill-health and pain which induced her to remark : "I have gone through so many yesterdays when I strove with Death and I realised to its full the wisdom of that sentence that it is to me not merely a figure of speech, but literal fact. And tomorrow I might die. It is scarcely two months since I came back from the grave ; is it worthwhile to be anything but radiantly glad ? Of all things that perhaps life or my temperament has given me I prize the gift of laughter as beyond price."

She was not however to be satisfied with mere domesticity, for the poems were produced in more and more rapid succession and found publicity in a well-known Magazine just started by her contemporary and friend Smt. Kamala Satthianadhan in 1901—*The Indian Ladies' Magazine.* Through the pages of this little popular journal and through the beauty of her verses which were being appreciated not only in India but in all English speaking countries, Sarojini soon became a renowned poetess, which the publication of her first book of verse, *The Golden Threshold* proved.

Words

Words flowed like cascades of flowers from Sarojini's enthralled lips. She existed in their magic and all those who heard or read her verses thrilled to their musical sound. It is nothing out of the common to realise that these words were all in English and not in any of the three Indian languages of her childhood home.

Why did Sarojini choose English ? One may as well ask why Sarojini wrote poetry at all, and why she uttered her orations clothed in such beautiful words. She electrified audiences with her exquisite command of words, and felt she was dedicated to the composition of her songs as she herself declared. This was her mission, and she sang :

To priests and to prophets
The joy of their creeds,
To kings and to cohorts
The glory of deeds ;
And peace to the vanquished
And hope to the strong...
For me, O my Master,
    The rapture of song ![1]

And this rapture, for Sarojini, was expressed in English.

The narrow outlook of Indian Pundits and foreign sponsors of literature who always seem to assess the worth of writing in one's own mother tongue, seems unrealistic and a waste of time. Indian reviewers are certainly guilty of this crime, possibly because they are short of other material with which they can assess a good or bad work of creation. Kamala Das, one of the present day Indian poets who has chosen to write in

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[1] *The Bird of Time*, P. 103

English—I refuse to give her the new label which is so popular, an 'Indo-Anglian' writer, of which there will be more to say later—cried out in protest against those who objected to Indians writing in English :

> 'I am an Indian very brown, born in
> Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
> Two, dream in one. Don't write in English they said
> English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
> Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
> Everyone of you, why not let me speak in
> Any language I like ?'

Yes, why do the critics not leave Sarojini alone also ? She has, like Toru Dutt, survived the test of time, and this is a positive sign of a classical writer. One may as well ask why Dylan Thomas did not write in Welsh, or James Joyce in his own Irish language ? Why have Naipaul the West Indian, Nobokov the Russian, Conrad the Pole, Lin Yu Tang the Chinese, Koestler the Hungarian and so many lovers of English chosen this *Lingua Franca* to express themselves ? A writer can in fact only speak in that language with which he is most familiar. One is inclined to agree with Sri Aurobindo Ghose when he belittled the stress laid on the understanding of a critic who accused Indians writing in English deserting their mother tongue : 'Is his understanding of such immense importance ? I might as well and just as responsibly ask him why Westerners like him should go to practise an Eastern thing like spirituality or Yoga, leaving their own parliaments, factories and what not.'

Though English was Sarojini's medium of expression, her imagery was entirely Indian. She determined to write no more of English flowers and birds and be accused of using English imagery or striving to imitate Shelley and Keats. Here was her own rich country with its vast and ancient culture and traditions, its varied life and its secret doors to be unlocked and the treasures scrutinised. What other paradise of traditional lore and Oriental customs could Sarojini want? And therefore she started writing with her imagery completely Indian. She revelled in her Indian scene and her ancestry. Her subjects are all Indian as her metaphors and similes, though she borrowed now and then from the Persian and Islamic. Her themes were domestic and rural and she based many of her rhythms on her folk songs which she heard from boatmen and reapers and weavers. The lilt of these songs transposed her into delight as can be seen even from a single example :

Wandering Singers
(Written in one of their tunes)

Where the voice of the wind calls our wandering feet,
Through echoing forest and echoing street
With lutes in our hands ever singing we roam,
All men are our kindred, the world is our own.[2]

One can imagine Sarojini leaning out of her window in the Ivory tower in which she lived her younger years, and listening to the singer passing below—or else of stopping her carriage and talking to these simple people. The temple bells, the mouzzin's call, the worship of *pujarees* and priests of all faiths thrilled her and ever gave her vision of unity—for which she so ardently craved.

Why should there be differences of religion—why cannot all mankind unite in deep respect for all forms of worship? We hear this theme again and again :

Call to Evening Prayer

Allah Ho Akbar! Allah Ho Akbar!
From Mosque and minar the mouzzins are calling ;
Pour forth your praises, O Chosen of Islam ;
Swiftly the shadows of sunsets are falling :
Allah Ho Akbar! Allah Ho Akber!

Ave Maria! Ave Maria!
Devoutly the priests at the altars are singing ;

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[2] *The Golden Threshold*, p. 28

Acc. No: ...1116...

O ye who worship the Son of the Virgin
Make your Orisons, the Vespers are ringing :
Ave Maria ! Ave Maria !

Ahura Mazda ! *Ahura Mazda* !
How the sonorous Avesta is flowing !
Ye who to flame and to light make obeisance,
Bend low where the quenchless torches are glowing :
Ahura Mazda ! *Ahura Mazda* !

Naray'yana ! *Naray'yana* !
Hark to the ageless divine invocation !
Lift up your hands, O ye children of Brahma !
Lift up your voices in wrapt adoration :
Naray'yana ! *Naray'yana* ![3]

Sarojini started her poetry with her descriptions of Hyderabad, and its varied life of Hindu-Muslim partnership. Here is a fascinating city :

See how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon's throat
Jewelled with embers of opal and peridote.
See the white river that flashes and scintillates
Curved like a tusk from the mouth of the city gates.[4]

Sarojini adored her princely city, and her home, the Golden Threshold, set like a jewel in the midst of oriental splendour of Hindu-Muslim architecture. She steeped herself in Islamic poetry and culture : 'The first accents I heard were in the tongue of Amir of Khusru. All my early associations were formed with the Mussalman men and Mussalman women of my city. My first playmates were Mussalman children.' For her there is nothing more beautiful than the 'immortal lyric of Rumi'. But she loved her Hindu culture too and ancient myths, though she never indulged in writing the Ballads of Hindustan as did her predecessor, Toru Dutt. Her knowledge of gods and goddesses inspired her no less, but mostly she loved the purdah world with all its rich secrets and treasures

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3. *The Bird of Time*, p. 45 & 46
4. *The Golden Threshold*

and lovely women, modest brides and matrons, and its jewels and caskets of perfumes, unguents and oils, and veils, satins and silks.

It is not long before she wanders further afield and writes of all parts of India, and her speeches pour forth in patriotic zeal. If Srinivasa Shastri was called the Golden Voiced Orator, Sarojini was certainly the Nightingale of India, or as someone laughingly remarked, the 'Naughty Gal'—a joke which the poetess enjoyed whole-heartedly, for there was nothing she appreciated so much as a joke against herself, whether uttered by others or narrated by herself.

The Golden Threshold

ARTHUR SYMONS wrote: 'It was her desire of beauty that made her a poet; her 'nerves of delight' were always quivering at the contact of beauty. To those who knew her in England, all the life of the tiny figure seemed to concentrate itself in the eyes; she turned towards beauty as the sun-flower turns towards the sun, opening wider and wider until one saw nothing but her eyes'.[1] Yes, beauty certainly intoxicated Sarojini, but in her pictures of things lovely there are conventional approaches which serve to make her poem stylised, and not quite true to nature. Her effusions are so enthusiastic that they are exaggerated and Sarojini in her poems never seemed to sense the seedy and unjust and ugly aspects of life as it is the characteristic of poets of the modern age. One feels rather suffocated with the ornate oriental beauty she depicts: Here is one of 'Indian Weavers' placing before our dazed eyes an image of vibrant colours. Here is the scene, devoid of all life's struggle and pain; and yet the under-lying pain of birth and death is very distinctly pictured.

> Weavers, weaving at break of day,
> Why do you weave a garment so gay ?...
> Blue as the wind of the halcyon wind,
> We weave the robes of a new born child.
>
> Weavers, weaving at fall of night,
> Why do you weave your garment so bright ?...
> Like the plumes of a peacock, purple and green
> We weave the marriage veils of a queen.
>
> Weavers, weaving solemn and still,
> What do you weave in your moonlight chill ?...

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[1] *The Golden Threshold*

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White as a feather and white as a cloud,
We weave a dead man's funeral shroud.

Here are the inevitable questions and answers which Sarojini loves to ask and to which she finds her own replies. But the scene is unrealistic and is only a romantic picture. Weavers do not weave by moonlight, or even at the fall of night. Sarojini has used her right of poetic licence in suiting the weavers products to the colours of the day, morning, nightfall and moonlight, another form of synchronising time and its passage with that of life itself and its journey from birth to death. There is a trace of symbolism here, and it must be remembered that Sarojini lived at the time of the symbolists movement in Literature. Symbolism, Arthur Symons says, can be traced to Gerard de Nerval (1808-1855). He formulated a style 'in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world is no longer a dream'.[2]

The Golden Threshold published in 1905 by William Heinemann took England by storm. Such lyrics if written today would possibly not be noticed at all, for they would have no place in the poetic world of the seventies, but in the first decade of the century, England was still steeped in Victorian sentimentality and this young colourful mysterious Indian girl's book was received with wild applause. It can also be remembered that when verse is praised so unstintingly by the highest critics of the day it must perforce have a great deal of worth in it, and though Sarojini may not have been able to start her poetic career today with her ornate and smooth running poems, the fact remains that she was much appreciated in 1905 ; it may be for this reason of having been appreciated so wholeheartedly that she will not die. Would a Tennyson, or even a Shelley have been acclaimed vociferously today ? But they established their schools of poetry which were the foundation stones of present day poetry, and thus Sarojini also made her small and spontaneous contribution with her lyrics, which could be classed with the Indian love lyrics and such oriental verses of her day and later, which will be sung and recited by certain sections of the public for many more years.

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[2] *Symbolists Movement in Literature* by Arthur Symons, p. 4

A few extracts from the press will illustrate the unstinted appreciation of the critics of 1905.

The London *Times* remarked that Mr. Arthur Symons had made the acquaintance of this Hindu lady some years earlier, and quoted his introductory passages, commenting on her wisdom, passion and honour : 'We find them all in her poems but chiefly remarkable, considering her nationality, is her passionate delight in the beauty of the sounds and the words of our tongue and the lilt of our measures. She revels in the swing of her verse. .. Her poetry seems to sing itself, as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves. There are the same unity and spontaneity about such poems, as that 'to a Buddha Seated on a Lotus', in which her wisdom has play... It is a far cry from that to her descriptive poems—motion and sight turned to music—or to the quaint and charming little songs to her four children. In this case the marriage of Western culture with the Eastern has not proved barren. It has given the poet new eyes with which to see old things. The result is something unique which we need not hesitate to call poetry'.[3]

The Manchester Guardian went into raptures : 'It is a considerable delight to come across such genuine poetry as is contained in *The Golden Threshold* by Sarojini Naidu. Its simplicity suggests Blake, it is always musical, its Eastern colour is fresh and its firm touch is quick and delicate'.[4]

The Review of Reviews of October 1905 wrote : 'Not for many months has there been so rich a harvest of poetry as that garnered during the last month. In the forefront I must place Sarojini Naidu's exquisitely musical collection of Oriental lyrics and poems. This little volume should silence forever the scoffer who declares that women cannot write poetry... It

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3. Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906
4. Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906

seems remarkable that the writer of these remarkably fine verses is only 26 years of age. To read Miss E. T. Fowler's verses *Wise and Otherwise* after this Indian girl's songs is so great a contrast as to be hardly fair to the English writer those poems seem pale in comparison. It is like passing from the gorgeous hues of the tropics to the stiff puniness of a suburban garden'.[5]

T. P.'s *Weekly* said: 'A book of verse of undeniable beauty and distinction... Sarojini Naidu's work is remarkable, opening a window through which the West may see the East if it will'. *The Morning Post* said : 'There are some small poems describing the daily life of the East which have an astonishing vividness. It is a rare art which gives the effect of poetry in what is, after all, only the accurate statement of what the eyes have seen... The book is one not merely of accomplishment, but beautiful verse, it is the expression of a temperament'.[6] *The Academy* praised *The Golden Threshold* as a book 'full of beauty. ...What is as delightful as surprising in its individuality : a perfection of its own that owes little to anyone. ...Not for a very long time have we seen a volume of poetry so full of promise and real achievement'.[7]

Liza Lehmann composed music for fifteen of Sarojini's songs. She planned to produce a cantata of these songs in London. Whether this was really produced or not is difficult to prove, but the intellectual circles in which Sarojini moved certainly worshipped this Indian girl with her soulful eyes.

The two English critics who really sponsored Sarojini's poetry, Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse were prominent men of letters at the time. Arthur Symons (1865-1945) was a Symbolist and according to the Cambridge History of English Literature an interesting 'Aesthetic'. His book *The Symbolists Movement in Literature* was a pioneer study and his translations were said to have inspired Yeats' poetry. Symbolism and mysticism were in the air, and a mystic child from India with dreamy eyes captured the imagination of this broad-minded tolerant Englishman who saw no snag in a foreigner writing in English. Though Sarojini Naidu felt she owed her inspiration to Gosse and wrote in her dedication to *The Golden Threshold* to 'Edmund Gosse who first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold', she owed no less to Arthur Symons who wrote the Introduction to this book. Symons had written and asked Sarojini to publish her poems in book form. Hitherto they had only appeared in journals and Magazines both abroad and in India. Now he wished to collect them as a volume to the world. Sarojini was quite overcome and wrote: 'Your letter made me very proud and very sad. Is it possible that I have written verses that are 'filled with beauty', and is it possible that you really think them worthy of being given to the world ? You know how high my idea of art is ; and to me my poor casual little poems seem to be less than beautiful—I mean with that final enduring beauty that I desire'. Again in all her modesty she confesses 'I am not a poet really. I have the vision and the desire, but not the voice. If I could write just one poem full of beauty and the spirit of greatness, I should be exultantly silent for ever ; but I sing just as the birds do, and my songs are as ephemeral'. Symons feels that it is just this 'bird-like' quality 'of song' which made her poetry valuable. 'They hint in a sort of delicate evasive way, at a rare temperament, the temperament of a woman of the East, finding expression through a Western language and under partly Western influences. They do not express the whole of that temperament ; but they express, I think, its essence ; and there is an Eastern magic in them'.[8]

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[5] Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906

[6] Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906

[7] Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906

Edmund Gosse who later wrote the introduction to Sarojini Naidu's second book, *The Bird of Time*, persuaded his protege as we have seen, to write of things Indian when she knew him in England between 1895 and 1898.

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[8] *The Golden Threshold*, p. 10

The Golden Threshold was not only hailed heartily in England, but India smiled with broad contentment at one of her daughters bursting forth into song. She henceforth became 'the Nightingale of India'.

District Library
Nawa Kadal, Srinagar.

Bharat Kokila

TWO NAMES for Sarojini live forever—they are "the Nightingale of India" and "Bharat Kokila" as Mahatma Gandhi called her. Sarojini was compared to the immortal bird, not only because of her poetry but her exquisite prose. I remember listening to her and returning home as if drunk with the beauty of her words. Her language, diction, elocution were all perfect. True, there were criticisms made that her speeches did not cover many important points. On reading the few speeches of Sarojini's which have been published, I feel however, that she covered a number of points and almost every contemporary subject of her time. It is a great gap in our literary publications that all her speeches have not been collected and put into a massive volume. G. A. Natesan of Madras did strive to collect them and has done the country a great service, but these speeches are mostly of her earlier years. The books are also out of print.

Sarojini soon felt that despite being a great success as a poet, she possessed other gifts, and she soon migrated to all parts of India from her home speaking on political and social and religious subjects. What was the magic of her words which held the audience spell-bound ? It was the fact that she brought a personal message to everyone of the audience as an individual. Her rich adjectives, her repetition of words and phrases, her sonorous voice and her poetic presentation all used to make us feel rather intoxicated when we listened to her. And she was speaking to each one of us. Here was a personality out of the common who stood before us and just spoke on and gave us a direct ideal to follow : 'The life of the spirit is not a thing that we can attain, but it is interwoven like a golden thread through the very fabric of our existence. I want you to realise, my friends, that even so there is a state of divinity which is possible, nay, it is necessary, that we must develop up to its full fire of godhead.'[1]

Her undying interest in human beings was no less astounding. Especially did she concentrate on the students of India, and on the emancipation of women. As early as 1903 she put her finger on the pulse of India's worst enemy—disunity, and she urged the young to work for the Motherland and keep together. 'You know that you are provincial', she thundered to a youthful audience in Madras. 'You are more limited than that—because your horizon is bounded almost by your city, your own sub-caste, your own self (Loud cheers). I know I am speaking rightly, because I also in my earlier youth was afflicated with the same sort of short-sightedness. Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged my ove, having widened my sympathies, having come in contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilisations, friends, my vision is clear.'[2]

Sarojini's work for the emancipation of women is of course too well-known to be repeated here, but it was again her smooth flow of words, her verses inciting women to 'Arise', 'Awake', her insistence on righting their wrongs and instilling an ideal and ambition in them to throw their veils aside and come into the open and serve the country and themselves, which made her the leader of the delegation in 1917 which waited on Lord Montagu, and the founder of the All India Women's Conference in 1926. She was the presence felt behind all the struggle and strain to ameliorate the position of women.

Sarojini fought throughout her life for Hindu Muslim Unity. She was passionately fond of both communities. She amalgamated the two together with her own mystic interpretation: 'Centuries ago when the first Islamic army came to India, they pitched their caravans on the banks of the Ganges and tempered and cooled their swords in the sacred waters. It was the

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 11
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6

baptism of the Ganges that gave the first welcome to the Islamic invaders that became the children of India as generations went by.'[3]

The ideas alone in her speeches are worth careful study—they were so original and soon Sarojini was lionised in all parts of India. She also became the first among freedom fighters, even when Mahatma Gandhi had not as yet made his name in South Africa. She participated fully in the Swadeshi Movement which started in 1905.

Sarojini's energy was unbounded. While she careered about the country delivering her immortal speeches, she composed more verse and her second volume *The Bird of Time* was published in 1912 by William Heinemann again. This beautiful book of lyrics she dedicated to her Father and Mother 'in token of life-long homage and affection'. Edmund Gosse wrote its introduction. According to him, Sarojini was no longer girlish in her verses, 'so noticeable in her previous poems'. That phase had passed and now there had dawned 'another facet of her eminent career—in close companionship with sorrow ; she had known the joy and also the despair of consolation. The sight of much suffering, perhaps, has thinned her jasmine-garlands and darkened the azure of her sky. It is known to the world that her labours for the public weal have not been carried out without deep injury to her private health. But these things have not slackened the lyric energy of Sarojini ; they have rather given it intensity. She is supported, as the true poet must be, by a noble ambition. In her childhood she dreamed magnificently ; she hoped to be a Goethe or a Keats for India. This desire, like so many others, may prove too heavy a strain for a heart that

'S'ouvrit comme une fleur profonde
Dont l'auguste carolle a predit l'orient.'

But the desire for beauty and fame, the magnificent impulse, are still energetic within this burning soul.'[4]

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[3] *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, pp. xvi & xxvii.

[4] *The Bird of Time*. pp. 6 & 7.

Her title was taken from Omar Khayyam :

> 'The Bird of Time has but a little way
> To fly—and lo the bird is on the wing.'

The reception of this second book was also warm, though it did not call forth as spontaneous and vociferous praise as her previous volume. Perhaps this was because, in spite of Gosse proclaiming that she had attained some form of maturity, she was still in the throes of her own verse form of *The Golden Threshold*—in fact she never grew out of this and the familiar India which she presented previously was to a certain extent worn out. But the *Yorkshire Post* said : 'Mrs. Naidu has not only enriched our language but has enabled us to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotions, the mysticism and the glamour of the East.' And her book sold well and India acclaimed her as a goddess.

Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Sarojini Naidu

SAROJINI NAIDU's capacity for deep and affectionate friendship was boundless, and her first friend and very first *Guru* before she adopted Mahatma Gandhi as 'Her Master' was that tremendous scion of moderate patriotism, Gopal Krishna Gokhale. This 'Heroic Heart' as Sarojini Naidu called him, died on February 19th, 1915, at the early age of 49. Though the difference in age between the two dear departed was only thirteen years, Gokhale had early become a leader, especially in South African affairs and as Mahatma Gandhi's restraining adviser. Indeed Gokhale helped to mould many an Indian hero. Sarojini Naidu looked upon him as a respected teacher. In fact, it was Gokhale who first, in 1902, inspired Sarojini to devote her life to the service of her motherland.

Gokhale belonged to the great race of Chitpawan Brahmins and together with Ranade, Tilak and Paranjpe formed a group of thought and leadership which are the foundation-stones of Indian freedom. He started the 'Servants of India Society' with a group of selfless workers, who gave their life, in poverty and self-sacrifice, for the service of their country. One day, in 1912, Sarojini Naidu, after delivering her lecture at the 'new historic session' of the Moslem League in Lucknow, travelled to Poona and walked from Fergueson College to the Servants of India Society with Mr. Paranjpe. Gokhale was weak and suffering with diabetes at the time, but he was no less absorbed in work, and was studying the new ideals of the Moslem League. When he saw his friend Sarojini, he cried, 'Ah, have you come to tell me that your vision was true ?' From then onwards, Gokhale and Sarojini Naidu were the champions of communal unity.

Gokhale admired Sarojini as much as she did him. In

1906, when Sarojini delivered a lecture in Calcutta on Women's Education, Gokhale was much overcome by the eloquence of her oratory and remarked that hearing her was 'more than an intellectual treat of the highest order'.

'An acquaintance begun on such a happy note of sympathy grew and ripened at last into a close and lovely comradeship which I counted amongst the crowning hours of my life', said Sarojini. 'Gokhale was a man whom Mahatma Gandhi compared to the river Ganga. One could have a refreshing bath in the holy river. It was a joy to be on it with a boat and an oar.' In 1890, Gokhale spoke at the Indian National Congress on the reduction of the Salt Tax. From that date he was an established member of this august body and, it was no exaggeration when Sarojini called him many years later 'the world famous leader of the Indian National Congress.' Gokhale fought whole-heartedly against the Partition of Bengal and indentured labour. Sarojini Naidu also became an ardent advocate of the abolition of this evil.

Sarojini's friendship with Gokhale ripened during the years 1907 to 1911. Each meeting left a fresh memory 'of some fervent and stirring word of exhortation to yield my life to the service of India'. Every now and then despite his own busy life, he would send a word of encouragement or a message of approval to the young poetess. In the early part of 1912, when Sarojini spent a good part of the year with her father, real intimate friendship began to take root. Gokhale said, 'Hitherto I have always caught you on the wing, now I will cage you long enough to grasp your true spirit.' Gradually Sarojini began to understand the true greatness of so versatile and dynamic a person—'A rich and paradoxical nature. He was a practical, strenuous worker' and 'a mystic dreamer of dreams' harmonised by his long 'Brahmanical ancestry' of discipline. When Sarojini presented her *guru* with her second published book of poems, *The Bird of Time*, Gokhale asked her, 'Does the flame still burn brightly ?' and when Sarojini ardently answered, 'Brighter than ever', he cried, 'I wonder how the storm of such long duration will withstand excessive adulation and success.

Both the heroic hearts were romantic. On a terrace together, Gokhale once said to Sarojini : 'Stand here with me with the stars and hills for witness and in their presence consecrate your life and your talent, your song and your speech, your thought and your dream to the motherland. O poet, see visions from the hilltops and spread the message of hope to the toilers in the valleys.'

In May 1912, Sarojini and Gokhale met in England. Sarojini was much surprised to see Gokhale in a new role, in Western dress, who, according to Sarojini, 'attended parties and played bridge and entertained ladies at dinner on the Terrace of the National Liberal Club.'

Gokhale was a sick man in London and often he drove out to Kensington Gardens with Sarojini. 'Give me a corner of your brain that I can call my own', he once said to her, and Sarojini adds, 'And in that special corner that was his I treasure many memorable sayings.' During the last years, Gokhale cherished his friendship with Sarojini so much in London that when she visited him, he called her 'the best of all his prescriptions'. Finally the parting came in October 1914. 'Something may be, of the autumnal sadness of fallen leaves and growing mists had passed into his mood, or, may be, he felt the foreshadowing of the wings of death.' He bade Sarojini farewell and said, 'I do not think we shall meet again. If you live, remember your life is dedicated to the service of the country. My work is done.'

First Meeting and Early Work with the Mahatma

It is a common belief that opposites are attracted towards each other. Certainly, in the case of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu a strange bond drew the two diametrically different personalities together. Gandhiji was an austere saint, simple in his ways of living, an ascetic and an apostle of Ahimsa. Sarojini Naidu was a gay poetess, joyous, fond of good-living, ornaments and coloured saris and an epicurean. She fully enjoyed the abundance of life in spite of ill health. And yet, the saint and the singer possessed many traits in common and their aspirations and ideals coincided. They were both the apostles of peace and unity. National integration was a point on which they were willing to sacrifice their lives. Also though Sarojini was not a vegetarian like the Mahatma, she was nevertheless an ardent and sincere adherent of Ahimsa. Then again, both Sarojini and Gandhiji were blessed with a sense of humour which carried them through the many trials and hardships which they had to face, and which made it possible for them to laugh in the face of chaos and disappointments and also to crack jokes at each other. No more truthful sentence was pronounced than that which Sarojini made when she remarked, 'If only Bapu knew the cost of setting him up in poverty.' Sarojini was able to understand the poverty which Mahatma Gandhi practised and preached—a new way of living had to bridge the gulf between the poor and the rich.

Sarojini was a worshipper of colour. Just as much as the Mahatma's world was built around a white or grey simple setting, her's was resplendent with the colours of the rainbow. It was with the greatest joy also that Mahatma Gandhi welcomes this brilliant songbird into his austere circle, for she certainly exuded laughter and happiness, and Mahatma Gandhi felt that these aspects of life were essential.

Sarojini Naidu was ten years younger than Mahatma Gandhi and was born in 1879. She met him for the first time in her early thirties, in 1914 in London. She remarked to a biographer later of this first meeting. 'I met him in 1914 and he was already Mahatma then.' Gandhiji arrived in England on August 6, 1914 from South Africa, two days after the commencement of the First World War. Gokhale had summoned him to London, but was himself delayed in Paris and could not meet his protégé. Gandhiji was therefore at a loose end in the great Metropolis, for he could do nothing until his *guru* arrived. Indians in England felt that their country should not help the war effort as they were already slaves, but Gandhiji insisted that we had not been 'reduced to slavery'. Neither could India embarrass England at the time of her hardship by asking for freedom. 'I thought that England's need should not be turned into our opportunity, and that it was more becoming and far-sighted not to press our demands while the war lasted.' He therefore started an Indian Voluntary Ambulance Corps, just as he helped the sick and wounded in South Africa during the Boer and Zulu wars. A joint letter signed by Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and other Indians was sent to British authorities offering their help. After some hesitation the British realised Gandhiji's sincerity ; training was initiated, and the corps organised. Sarojini and Gandhiji were therefore drawn together to work for the same cause. Sarojini was a member of the Lyceum, a well-known ladies club, and the members undertook the sewing of garments for the Indian Voluntary Corps. The first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi is described dramatically by the poetess. She writes : 'Curiously enough, my first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi took place in London on the eve of the great European War of 1914... When he arrived fresh from his triumphs in South Africa, where he had initiated his principle of passive resistance and won a victory for his countrymen, who were at that time chiefly indentured labourers, over the redoubtable

General Smuts. I had not been able to meet his ship on arrival, but the next afternoon I went wandering around in search of his lodgings in an obscure part of Kensington and climbed the steep stairs of an old, unfashionable house, to find an open door framing a living picture of a little man with a shaven head, seated on the floor on a black prison blanket and eating a messy meal of squashed tomatoes and olive oil out of a wooden prison bowl. Around this were ranged some battered tins of parched groundnuts and tasteless biscuits of dried plaintain flour. I burst instinctively into laughter at the amusing and unexpected vision of a famous leader, whose name had already become a household word in our country. He lifted his eyes and laughed back at me, saying : 'Ah, you must be Madame Naidu ! who else dare to be so irreverant ? Come in and share my meal.' 'No thanks', I replied sniffing, 'What an abonimable mess it is.' In this way, and at that instant commenced our friendship, which flowered into real comradeship, and bore fruit in a long, long loyal discipleship, which never wavered for a single hour through more then thirty years of common service in the cause of India's freedom.'

Sarojini also recalled the great gathering which greeted this frail couple on their visit to London, and she saw as much of the Mahatma as she could before she returned to India a few days later. 'It thrilled me', she says, 'that men of all nations—Eastern and Western—gathered in his home, proof that true greatness speaks in a universal admiration.'

After her return, Sarojini Naidu renewed her lecture tours. Mahatma Gandhi fell ill in London and was ordered complete rest. When he returned to India in 1915, he was asked by Gokhale to take rest for a year before he started any work, which he did. Sarojini was therefore a better known personality in India a few years before the Mahatma. But Sarojini's admiration for the saint had already been stirred by following his career in South Africa and in her book, *The Broken Wing*, she addressed a poem to him.

In 1916 Mahatma Gandhi attended the Congress session and was drawn into Indian politics. Here he found Sarojini Naidu already playing a prominent part. She had created a stir in Bombay the year before when she had recited her poem 'Awake' at the Indian National Congress.

From 1916 the freedom movement began to take on a definite shape. The incident at Champaran brought the Mahatma also into the limelight. He began to divert his interest from South Africa to his own motherland. Such subjects as self-government, indentured labour, Hindu-Moslem unity and other important subjects induced both the Mahatma and Sarojini to work beside each other, casting their nets wide over the suffering masses of their country. The passing of the Rowlatt or Black Bills in 1919 brought deep discontentment to the country and strong agitations were started. Before they were passed, great efforts were made to try and prevent them being enacted. In March 1919 Mahatma Gandhi called a conference at Sabarmati Ashram. Only a dozen people were invited, among whom were Sarojini Naidu. The Satyagraha pledge was drafted, and among those to sign it was Sarojini. Before the Hartal in April, Sarojini spoke in different parts of the country. Her extraordinary gift of oratory aroused the people in a miraculous manner. In March, 1919 she addressed a mammoth meeting in Madras and expressed her loyalty to Gandhiji and Satyagraha: 'For Satyagraha movement is a theory of organic life which must, of necessity, grow and expand because it carries within itself the immortal functions of life, and so the Satyagraha movement has kindled its fire in the temple or ashrama where Mahatma Gandhi is the high priest or *guru*.' 'To speak the truth was good, but to live the truth was better', she cried.

A mass All-India Hartal was staged on April 6th, 1919. In Bombay especially was the movement a success. Moslems and Hindus worked together as a team. Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini were taken to a mosque where both delivered speeches. The next day, on his way to Amritsar, Gandhiji was arrested. Then came the Jallianwalabagh atrocities. So great was the feeling of horror against the dreadful debacle staged in Jallianwalabagh that Rabindranath Tagore surrendered his Knighthood and Gandhiji his Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal later. The freedom movement was now well on its way and the army of nonviolent satyagrahis increased in ever swelling numbers. The Montford reforms, the visit of the Prince of Wales, and the casual manner in which India was treated after she had shed so much blood for the British cause in the great war built up a steady indignation which grew and Moslems were very much in the struggle, especially as the Indian Khilafat movement showed how great was Hindu sympathy for the Moslem cause in the Middle East.

The violence which broke out during the Prince of Wales' visit and the disturbances at Chauri Chaura made Gandhiji actually remark that 'Swaraj stank in his nostrils'. He pleaded for peace but the people seemed to have lost all sense of proportion. Sarojini, working in the violence-affected areas relayed a message: 'Please send a surgeon immediately, men dead, dying and wounded are lying on the road.' Gandhiji was on fast for the sins of his people, and his followers worked night and day to restore peace. A writer remarks: 'What shall I say of Srimati Sarojini Naidu's daring ? Time after time she would go out amongst rioters in the different areas of the disturbance and coming back each time, she would relate to Mahatma her personal exploits, not forgetting to give a dramatic picture of the acts of cowardice of which some others might have been guilty. Thus, she of them all, could occasionally bring a smile to the Mahatma's lips, even in the midst of his grief and anxiety.'

The Broken Wing

WITH THE publication of 'The Broken Wing' in 1917 Sarojini's output of poems, except for sporadic bursts of song, came to an end. There seem to be many reasons for this sudden avoidance of writing poetry. Perhaps the most feasible was the fact that Sarojini could not fit into the modern scene. Georgian poetry had already been popular since the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century and Sarojini knew that she had never stepped even into the margin of the circle of these new free writers. Now her school of poetry was becoming old-fashioned and a newer school was starting. It rose in its cynical and obscure splendour after the first world war, and it was not a realm into which she could enter with her lyrical rules and regulations and adherence to form.

The second reason may have been because Sarojini felt that she had failed in writing really philosophical verse as she tried to do in *The Broken Wing*. Gokhale had asked her when she had told him in 1915 the title of her next book, 'Why should a song bird like you have a broken wing ?' She must have felt that she had come to the end of her lyrical subjects and now she had little more to add. The world was becoming more and more tragic and grim and she was a bird of song. Where did birds fit into this chaotic era of a world war ? The answer to Gokhale's question was however not hesitantly given. It was full of confidence :

> 'Behold I rise to meet the destined spring
> And scale the stars upon my broken wing.'

Like Garuda, whose wings were burnt by the rays of the sun, but who nevertheless helped Rama, she must, whether hurt or injured, rise up above her difficulties and problems and 'scale the stars'. This theme is again accentuated in her memorable speech given at the Asian Conference in 1947.

The task Sarojini set herself in her dedication to *The Broken Wing* was unfortunate. It asked for a strange involvement of the poet with Indian women and national service, apart from philosophy. The varied subjects just did not merge into each other as a whole. The poems, individual as they are, cover Songs of Life and Death, Memorial verses, Songs of Music and finally 'The Temple', 'The Pilgrimage of Love' in three parts. While the individual lyrics are almost as beautiful as her previous ones, her trilogy seems to fall in its object of presenting the heart of a devoted woman to her lover, which she seems to have intended symbolically to represent the call of the Divine to the mortal soul.

To begin with the Dedication, one feels that any poet who writes with the purpose of propaganda or deliberately thrusting forward set but not necessarily inspired ideas cannot really succeed. To quote the Dedication in full *The Broken Wing* which was written in 1916 was offered to 'The Dream of Today and The Hope of Tomorrow.' These words are quite in character with Sarojini's style of poetry. But the purpose with which the foreword weighs down a simple ephemeral poet is more than the reader can understand, for Art cannot be 'reduced to a formula'.[1] Her foreword is nothing short of a formula, clothed in the cloying task of looking back to the past —a fault so apparent in Indian writers.

Apart from reading the foreword, one feels like dropping the book, but we have already enjoyed so much of Sarojini's verses previously. Let us venture into the pages and see what she has to say.

Apart from Songs of Life and Death and other occasional verses, *The Broken Wing*'s last section, a trilogy called 'The Temple' (The Pilgrimage of Love) contains twenty-four poems, each part consisting of eight. The three sub-titles are 'The Gate of Delight', which deals with love's fulfilment; the girl's life is dedicated to her lover and all is offered on the burning

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1. *Key to Modern Poetry* by Laurence Durrnell

altar of passion, 'The Path of Tears' which is a gradual disillusionment of the sensual cravings of the girl, and finally 'The Sanctuary', the culmination of love's tragic drama and a form of rejection which she bemoans.

The impression created, at least to me, is that of poignant passion and abandonment which may have had some relation to Sarojini's own emotional disturbance at the time, if such was the case. There seems to have been some great disappointment in romance, for which she has sacrificed her all. She now abandons every romantic sensual longing and starts a new life so to speak. This passion for the human lover is symbolic of the Divine and Sarojini strives to reach metaphysical heights, but fails rather sadly, because her poems here are not like the spontaneous outpourings of the few mystical verses she previously wrote, three of which were good enough to be included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* in 1917 'The Pilgrimage of Love' is also the symbolic expression of the architecture of a Temple, the gate, the path leading up to the shrine and the sanctuary itself.[2] We are also told by a critic that the Temple is a lover's abode and that metaphysically it is the creative world and that the pilgrimage is the incarnation. Finally, the poems follow the concept of Vaishnavism and the Radha-Krishna cult. Also 'they allude to the legends of the great *pativratas* like Sukanya, Savitri and Anasuya'.[3] How very complicated, especially when all these ideas are to be succinctly expounded in twenty four slender verses : They should have been epic in their stature !

In 'The Pilgrimage of Love', especially the last poems, Sarojini is full of self pity. Even the first part is not exempt from this weakness which Sarojini shows throughout her poetic output. In 'The Menace of Life' in the second part, she evinces anger and frustration :

> The tumult of your own wild heart shall smite you
> With strong and sleepless pinions of desire,

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[2] *The Two-fold Voice* by D. Y. K. Raghavacharyulu,
Essay of Sarojini Naidu by R.

[3] *Ibid.*

The subtle hunger in your veins shall bite you
With the swift and unrelenting fangs of fire.

When youth and spring-passion shall betray you
And mock your proud rebellion with defeat,
God knows, O Love, if I shall save or slay you
As you lie spent and broken at my feet.

Surely the use of such words as 'bite', and the simile to a 'dogs fangs' are undignified. Did Sarojini strive to use the free vocabulary of modern poets but fail to fit them adequately into her frame-work of Victorian poetry ?

The lover has now been flouted in her Pilgrimage of Love, and she cries in 'Love's Guerdon' :

Restore me not the rapture that is gone,
The hope forbidden and the dream denied...
The ruined purpose and the broken pride...
Grant in the brief compassion of an hour
A gift of tears to save my stricken soul.

Take my flesh to feed your dogs if you choose
Water your garden-trees with my blood if you will!
Turn my heart into ashes, my dreams into dust—
Am I not yours, O Love, to cherish or kill ?

Strangle my soul and fling it into the fire !
Why should my true love falter or fear or rebel
Love, I am yours to lie in your heart like a flower,
Or burn like a weed for your sake in your flame.

I do not agree with a critic that these poems of The Temple are the 'greatest regulated success... Apart from Mrs. Browning's sonnets from the Portugues, there is no poetical sequence of such passion addressed by a women to a man.'[4] The opinion of James H. Cousins seems more appropriate, 'Its preoccupation with love appears to go off into a cul-de-sac and in the pursuance of this particular phase of her art, she sometimes achieves something that is periliously like insincerity, and an emotional untidiness that sometimes mars her art'. 'Our poetess has flung herself into an emotional exaggeration that obscures the clear vision of the spirit, and she pays the penalty in positive ugliness.'[5]

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[4] *Indian Writing in English* by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 184

But the earlier poems in *The Broken Wing* which are not included in The Temple (The Pilgrimage of Love) are just as beautiful as her previous verses.

A peep into her own private life is shewn in her beautiful poem to her father, *Salutation to my Father's Spirit*, This sonnet, was composed on January 28, 1915, at the time of her father's death.

Sarojini suffered greatly in the loss of her friend Gokhale and her adored father within a few days of each other. Gopal Krishna Gokhale passed away on February 19, 1915 and Sarojini wrote the following note of tribute beneath her poem : 'Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the great saint and soldier of our national righteousness. His life was a sacrament, and his death was a sacrifice in the cause of Indian Unity.'

Aghorenath died a month before Gokhale, and the latter, not knowing his own impending death, wrote of Sarojini's father to the poetess, 'I wish I had been anywhere near so that I could have gone to see you personally. I do hope your grief will break into songs that will abide.' Sarojini later wrote, 'These words were written on February 12, with no apparent premonition of his own fast approaching end.'

A woman of deep sensibility and profound feelings, 1915 was a sad year for Sarojini, and it is no wonder that not only the pathos but the frustrations of those years are reflected in her book *The Broken Wing*. In this book she also loses herself in Cosmic mysticism. Her poem to the Mother Goddess combines all her fervour and longing for Infinite Unity :

Kali the Mother

All Voices : O terrible and tender and divine !
O mystic mother of all sacrifice,

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[5] *The Renaissance of India* by James H. Cousins

We deck the sombre altars of thy shrine
With sacred besil leaves and saffron rice!
All gifts of life and death we bring to these
Uma! Haimavati!
Maidens: We bring thee buds and berries from the wood!
Brides: We bring thee rapture of our bridle prayer!
Mother: We bring thee sweet travail of motherhood.
Widows: And we the bitter vigils of our despair.
All Voices: All gladness and all grief we bring to thee
Ambika! Parvati!
Artisans: We bring thee lowly tribute of our soil!
Peasants: We bring our new-born goats and budded wheat!
Victors: And we the swords and symbols of our toil!
Vanquished: And we the shame and sorrow of our defeat!
All Voices: All triumph and all tears we bring to thee
Girija! Shambhabi!
Scholars: We bring thee secrets of our orient arts!
Priests: We bring thee treasures of our ancient creeds!
Poets: And we the subtle music of our hearts!
Patriots: And we the sleepless worship of our deeds!
All Voices: All glory and all grace we bring to thee
Kali! Maheshwari!

Sarojini Naidu told Amarnath Jha on May 1st, 1935 that she considered the Illusion of Love, in the 'Sanctuary', the thirdpart of her poem 'The Temple' (The Pilgrimage of Love) in *The Broken Wing* as her best poem:

Beloved, you may be as all men say
Only a transient spark
Of flickering flame in a lamp of clay—
I care not...since you kindle all my dark
With the immortal lustres of the day.
And as all men deem, dearest, you may be
Only a common shell

Chance-winnowed by the see-winds from the sea—
I care not.. since you make most audible
The subtle murmurs of eternity.
And tho' you are, like men of mortal race,
    Only a hapless thing
That Death may mar and destiny efface—
I care not...since unto my heart you bring
The very vision of God's dwelling place.

The Birth of the Freedom Struggle

AND NOW Sarojini, having more or less abandoned poetry as her most favourite pastime, flung herself into the struggle for freedom and women's emancipation. She never, however, ceased to think of herself as a songster, and seems always to have cherished the idea of writing more verse. In 1928 she told her great friend Amarnath Jha that she intended writing a book called 'Feathers of Dawn'. Mr. Jha says : 'We heard no more of this collection and it is to be feared that the poems are lost'.[1] But it is interesting that a book entitled *The Feather of Dawn* was published containing unpublished poems by Sarojini, in 1961. A slender volume was published by the Hyderabad Poetry Society of which Mr. Jha says that 'It is an attractive production The cover design is a photographic reproduction of one of the Ajanta frescoes, and the book is printed on Hyderabad hand-made paper'.[2] It contained two unpublished poems by Sarojini which did not appear in the *Sceptred Flute*, a collection of all her poems published later. The two poems in the Hyderabad book are 'The Flute Player' and 'Little Kanhya' both about Lord Krishna. Sarojini kept her lamp of poetry alight therefore to a certain extent, though she now realised that she was deeply plunged in politics and the achievment of freedom for her country. Prison and padyayatras and processions and public platforms and hartals are hardly conducive for the encouragement of the poetic Muse. But she sorrowed at having to abandon her natural gift for writing verse. She wrote in the Broken Wing :

> Can ye measure the grief of the tears I weep
> Or compass the woe of the watch I keep ?

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1. *Sarojini Naidu* by Amarnath Jha p. 11
2. Ibid. p. 21

Or the pride that thrills thro' my heart's despair
And the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer ?
And the far sad and glorious vision I see
Of the torn red banners of Victory ?

The Swadeshi movement gathered momentum, especially in 1905 when Congress protested against the Partition of Bengal. In 1915 this national body reoriented itself and in 1916, Hindus and Muslims, working together, put forward a new set of reforms.

Lokamanya Tilak started his Home Rule League in 1916 and Annie Besant now awoke the country to a sense of full political freedom. Mahatma Gandhi also now took up the cudgels and Sarojini joined happily in the fray.

There is an amusing incident which Amarnath Jha recalls in 1917. 'Sarojini was to speak at a Conference and she remarked to her friend : Gandhiji does not want any English speeches. I don't know how I am going to speak in Hindustani. I tell you what. When I get up, ask students to shout, 'English', 'English'.' 'But actually', says Mr. Jha, 'she spoke in high-flown Persianised Urdu'.[3] She was in fact fluent in Urdu ; but she chose to speak on most occasions in English, possibly because high-flown Urdu was not understood by audiences in all parts of India as well as English. At the Bihar Students' Conference when Sarojini presided, she spoke in Urdu but her commentator says : 'She delivered the presidential address in Urdu, which was not easily understood by the gathering'.[4]

Sarojini Naidu first met Jawaharlal Nehru in 1916 at the Lucknow Congress Session. It was at this time that he also met Mahatma Gandhi. He remarked regarding Sarojini, 'I remember being moved also in those days by a number of eloquent speeches by Sarojini Naidu. It was all nationalism and patriotism and I was a pure nationalist, my vague socialist ideas of college days having sunk into the background'.[5]

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[3] Sarojini Naidu by Amarnath Jha. p. 7

[4] Ibid. p. 8

[5] *An Autobiography* by Jawaharlal Nehru, p. 38

These awakening years of national consciousness were also important for the great efforts women such as Margarette E. Cousins, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu and other pioneers made for the emancipation of women. It is a coincidence that in 1917 Indira Gandhi was born, a woman who is now Prime Minister of India—showing how, in the course of fifty years, women from no position in general at all have risen to the very highest peak. On her birth on November 19, 1917 Sarojini wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, stating a prediction that his daughter would be 'the new soul of India'.

Sarojini went for the third time to England in 1919 and was by now an established belligerent but peaceful fighter for the cause of India's independence. She returned to India in 1920 and then followed a series of struggles, hartals and trials. The great trial of Mahatma Gandhi took place in 1922. Sarojini attended the court proceedings and wrote in the Bombay Chronicle of March 1922: 'A convict and a criminal in the eyes of the Law; nevertheless the entire court rose in an act of spontaneous homage when Mahatma Gandhi entered—a frail, serene, indomitable figure in a coarse and scanty loin cloth, acompanied by his devoted disciple and fellow-prisoner, Shankarlal Banker.... 'So you are seated near me to give me your support in case I break down', he jested, with that happy laugh of his which seems to hold the undimmed radiance of the world's childhood in its depths, and looking round at all who had come, he said: 'This is like a family gathering and not a law-court. A thrill of fear, pride and hope ran through the crowd when the judge took his seat.... An admirable judge, deserving of our praise alike for his brave and resolute sense of duty, his flawless courtesy, his just perception of a unique occasion and his fine tribute to a unique personality.... The strange trial proceeded and as I listened to the immortal words that glowed with prophetic fervour from the lips of my beloved master, my thoughts sped across the centuries to a different land and different age when a similar drama was enacted and another divine and gentle teacher was crucified for spreading a kindred gospel with a kindred courage. I realised now that the lowly Jesus of Nazareth, cradled in a manger, furnished the only parallel in history to this invincible apostle of Indian liberty who loved humanity with unsurpassed compassion, and to use his own beautiful phrase 'approached the poor with the mind of the poor'.' Mahatma Gandhi was convicted to six years imprisonment. After Gandhiji's arrest Sarojini took up his work and toured about dressed in khaddar.

In 1925, Sarojini Naidu was elected President of the Congress at the Kanpur session in December. When she was declared President-elect in October, Mahatma Gandhi who was in the chair at Belgaum declared that Sarojini should have been in his place.

It was a novel feature to have a woman in the chair; Gandhiji handed over charge to her. Sarojini took over in her own inimitable manner 'with a few choice words'. Her Presidential address was perhaps the shortest delivered. She insisted on unity between political parties and Indians themselves. She begged her countrymen to abolish fear. 'In the battle for liberty fear is the one unforgiveable treachery, and despair the one unforgiveable sin.'[6]

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[6] *The Htstory of the Indian National Congress*. p. 294

Letters and Friendships

SAROJINI NAIDU not only had the knack of making lasting and loving friendships with individuals, many of whom still speak in adoring terms of her ; but her great task was to cement trust and faith between communities, creeds and races. Mahatma Gandhi's choice in sending her to America as India's unofficial ambassador to counteract the effects which Miss Mayo's *Mother India* had presented to the world, was by far the wisest selection he could have made from all his faithful followers. The letters Sarojini wrote from America were literary masterpieces, and a glimpse has to be taken of them in order to gauge Sarojini's genius in composing colourful lively and yet important political documents which need preservation and republication.

Her visit created a sensation and Sarojini was admired and idolised. The *New York Times* carried the headline :

> India's Poetess To Visit America. Sarojini Naidu will tell of the changes that are coming over the lives of Indian Women against the most ancient traditions.

There seems to have been some talk of the publication of a new book of Poetry, but such a volume did not materialise at the time Sarojini was to deliver a series of lectures in groups.

Recitals of her poems were also much appreciated in all parts of America. She was received with warm hospitality everywhere—attended banquets, in honour of the Poetess-Ambassador, entered American homes as an honoured guest and friend, and lectured extensively to crowded audiences. Sarojini was enthralled with the New World and her letters to the Mahatma, many of which were published in *Young India*, give a glimpse of her rich language and mastery of English. Writing from Cincinnati, where a great friend of the Negroes once lived and wrote, she said : 'I have just returned from interpreting to a large audience (whose parents and grand-parents knew Harriet Beecher Stowe in the days when she was writing the poignant tale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), the message of the 'Mystic Spinner'.' Sarojini delivered her lectures 'as one inspired' and was told that she had taken a message that would always inspire those who heard her. Sarojini's message, like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was also one of deliverance from bondage—'Another version for another land.' Here was 'the gospel of the 'Mystic Spinner' as interpreted by a wandering singer'.

She loved the 'flowering roads' and 'foam kissed acres' of California. The settlers originally always thought they would return home. 'And so they drifted on, never bothered about establishing a social tradition or educational record similar to the activities of other immigrant races who became in the real sense *American* and therefore an integral and acceptable unit of the new nation in a new world'. She decides : 'I have come to the conclusion after all my visits to Africa and America that the status of Indian settler can *never* be satisfactory anywhere till the status of India is definitely assured among the free nations of the world.'

Mahatma Gandhi was delighted with the effect his Ambassador created in America and Canada and in July 1929 when Sarojini returned home, he wrote : 'The wandering singer has returned home after making many conquests in the West. Time alone will show how lasting is the impression created by her. If the reports received from private sources in America be any criterion, Sarojini Devi's work has left a profound impression on the American mind. From that triumphal tour she has returned none too soon to take her share in solving the many and intricate problems facing us in the country. May she cast over us the spell she was always able so successfully to cast over the Americans.'

Her letters to Mahatmaji were often long and she asked him to forgive her, but he replied that he loved 'long love letters' and her 'illegible scrawls'.

Sarojini wrote describing her home life to Pandit Nehru on the short durations she stayed at *The Golden Threshold* : 'My dear Jawahar, I am writing from the Golden Threshold, sitting on my own carved blackwood couch with Ras Taffari, Pavo Nourmi, Nicolo Pissano and Dik Dik Mahjong—the four-footed rulers of the house harmoniously stretched all around me, the sun-birds and honey-birds making music in the garden among the flowering Gul Mohurs and scarlet roses'.[1] '...Padmaja is in thrills over the New Fiat that has just arrived from Bombay. Govind is praying in his heart while he feeds on a belated lunch of *Bhaigura Baigan* and *Falsa sherbet*, that the Exalted One won't spoil his holiday among the rocks and waters of our intended destination'.[2] It was this atmosphere of free home life which Sarojini so enjoyed, and which was such a tonic for her. What would she have done without these periodic holidays at home ? She writes : 'In a word, I am at home having my first holiday since 1921, a real holiday with every snake shut out from the paradise in the guise of outside cares, responsibilities and duties. Basely but bravely have I deserted my post for a few weeks because my soul needed and cried out for an atmosphere of beauty, burgeoning trees, nesting birds, lyric poets, the children and dogs and old friends and a little leisure from the constructive programme and the self-destruction programme of our so-called politics.'

As the time for partition drew near, Sarojini felt the tragedy, and her heart was ever with the Mahatma as he wandered from village to village in East Bengal. She wrote from Santiniketan to Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 :

> 'This is not a letter, it is an affirmation of love and faith. Had it been possible I should have tried to reach you if only for a moment. You will, I know, approve of my

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[1] *A Bunch of Old Letters.* p. 42:

[2] *A Bunch of Old Letters*, p. 42

leaving Bengal without even making the effort. I neither need to see you nor speak with you, because you dwell in my vision and your message always sings itself to the world through my heart.

'Beloved Pilgrim, setting out on your pilgrimage of love and hope, 'Go with God' in the beautiful Spanish phrase. I have no fear for you—only faith in your mission.'

Sarojini[3]

Amarnath Jha says that when he was about to leave for England Sarojini gave him introductions to Bernard Shaw, Walter de la Mare, Humbert Wolffe, Mrs Munro and Laurence Binyon. Mr. Jha says: 'Each letter was delightfully phrased' and in reaching London he comments that Bernard Shaw made kindly inquiries about Madame Naidu and was sorry that on his visit to India he could not meet her, as she was then in Jail. On Amarnath Jha's return to India Sarojini asked him about Walter de la Mare and H. G. Wells whom he had met in England.

Sarojini was very friendly with the Mountbattens. Once, when he was in Benares in 1948 to speak to the students, she had suggested that he should wag his fingers at them and cry: 'You naughty, naughty children'. He commented: 'I have neither the advantage of her sex nor her prestige to be able to get away with that.'

In 1947 Alan Campbell-Johnson came across a charming letter from 'the famous Sarojini Naidu to Lady Mountbatten. After Independence when she accepted the position of Governorship of the U. P. she wrote, 'The Governor General's Lady from a mere Governor' and expressed her admiration for Lady Mountbatten's services to India. The letter ended thus: 'I don't know how long I shall be in these provinces, but my one real gift has been having full scope and bearing real fruit. My gift of friendliness. Men and women who have not spoken to each other for years meet under my roof every day in a cordial manner after an initial moment of uncertainty...oh yes—the lions and the lambs lie down very pleasantly together in my green pastures. Each of us can only do our best, as Browning says: 'There shall never be one lost good'. What a comforting belief.'[4]

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[3] *My Days with Gandhi*, by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Asia Publishing House, 1953, p. 139

The secret of Sarojini's friendships consisted no doubt in her really loving and caring for all those she visited when sick or in want.

She was friendly with all communities and races. The Ali brothers, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, Srinivasa Shastri were among her earlier friends. Reminiscing about Sarojini, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy wrote to me: 'Sarojini was very intimately associated with Jinnah and his activities as an Indian political leader, and perhaps, next to Gandhiji the dominating influence on Sarojini's life was that of Jinnah, although she was far superior to him intellectually and spiritually, the difference being between genius and talent. Sarojini herself seemed to think Jinnah was quite a man of genius and once she told me that I should have included him in a book about leading Indians, saying he was one of the greatest of leaders'.

Dinabandhu C. F. Andrews was another friend and they shared their interest in indentured labour. C. F. Andrews visited America at the same time as Sarojini in connection with Miss Mayo's Book and he commented on Sarojini as follows to Mahatmaji:

'Sarojini Naidu's visit has been amazing. She has won all hearts, and I have been hearing nothing but praise about her visit everywhere.'

Sarojini stirred the affections of great writers of the day. Aldous Huxley mentioned her prominently in his *Jesting Pilate*. Meeting her in Bombay in 1925, he said: 'It has been our good fortune while in Bombay, to meet Sarojini Naidu, the newly elected President of the All-India Congress and a woman who combines in the most remarkable way great intellectual power with charm, sweetness, and courageous energy, a wide culture with originality, and earnestness with humour. If all Indian politicians are like Mrs. Naidu, then the country is fortunate indeed'.[5]

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[4] *Mission with Mountbatten*, p. 195

When Sarojini Naidu went to the Second Round Table Conference with Mahatma Gandhi, she attracted the writers almost as much as the statesmen. John Haynes Holmes, author of *My Gandhi* thought her the 'greatest Indian Woman'. A writer remarked that 'Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, poetess, politician, walking encyclopaedia on everyone's affairs, combining the shrewdness of her years with the vivacity of a young girl, almost more than any other Indian politician, has the qualities which appeals to English people. While she can laugh at others (not without a pinch of malice) she can also convulse an audience with jokes against herself. There is not the suspicision of any inferiority complex about Sarojini Naidu, and she is impatient and outspoken when she meets this trait in her countrymen. Who will forget her indiscretion at the end of one of the sessions of the conference when she turned to look for Mr. Gandhi and asked : 'Where is our little Mickey Mouse ?' Many will remember another occasion when a certain delegate had bored his colleagues almost beyond endurance by a repeat performance of his views in favour of second chambers. 'Why any second chambers ?' asked Mrs. Naidu. She was, she said, in favour of third, or lethal chambers for certain politicians.

A great audience awaited the arrival of the Indians at Friends' Meeting House in London. There was Lawrence Houseman, brother of the poet A. E. Houseman. He commented that Mrs. Naidu was 'a magnificent specimen of womanhood, richly clad in native silk, erect in stature, commanding in mien, a potent and beautiful presence'.[6] Beverley Nichols, author of the not-so popular *Verdict on India* nevertheless much

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5. *Jesting Pilate, The Dairy of a Journey*, by Aldous Huxley. p. 12
6. *My Gandhi* by John Haynes Holmes. p. 41

appreciated Sarojini and she liked him, she told me, because he admired her black cat.

Thus through the years this dauntless personality continued her gallant and momentous journey through life, loved and honoured by society in all parts of the world ; but full of pain and pathos too, for she loved her friends and the loss of each one was a sorrow she could not forget. When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated Sarojini wrote a foreword to the book edited by H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford and Lord Pethic Lawrence. She said : 'The festival of lights is at hand, but this year neither the clay lamps of our villages nor the silver lamps of our cities will be kindled in honour of Dipavali, because the heart of the nation still deeply mourns the death of Mahatma Gandhi, who redeemed it from centuries of bondage and gave to India her freedom and her flag'. Indeed, something died in Sarojini when with the words 'Hé Ram', her master expired on January 30, 1948, thirteen months before her own death. The world went dark, and the beacon light which had guided Sarojini for three and a half decades shone no more. As she herself expressed in her foreword she had been intimately associated with her master for many years, in 'his great campaigns for liberation of India', in his marches 'to prison under his banner', in his vigils kept during his epic fasts for the sins of those whom he loved or those who hated him. And having been so closely connected, so deeply devoted, she felt that it was 'almost an act of vivisection to attempt to analyse or interpret the unique personality, the mind and the spirit of this rare, this unrivalled being, who was not only our leader, our friend, our father but literally and integrally, part of life itself.' The next year she herself was no more, and the *Bharat Kokila* rested with her master the Mahatma, her rasounding voice for ever silent.

The Years of Struggle

AFTER RETURNING from America in the middle of 1929 Sarojini was immersed in a none-too-happy world of intense political self-determination. Hartals, arrests and imprisonments were the order of the day.

When Mahatma Gandhi set out on his Salt March on March 12, 1930 with seventyfive chosen comrades on his *Padayatra*, he decreed that no women were to join him. The *Padacharees* walked about a dozen miles each day, and as they proceeded towards the sea their numbers grew. They reached Dandi two hundred miles away on April 5th after marching 24 days. Sarojini was at Dandi to meet the Mahatma. After prayers, Gandhiji defied the Salt law by picking up some dried salt on the beach. Thousands of women had now added to the throng of non-violent volunteers. They brought vessels with them to carry home sea water and waste salt. Mahatma Gandhi greatly admired the courage of these women who had never before left home and said their part would be 'written in letters of gold'. Women were by now fully included in his movement.

As Mahatmaji picked the salt up Sarojini cried : 'Hail deliverer' and thousands waded into the water to fill their vessels. The police immediately began their arrests, and the whole country was now in an uproar. Never was Mahatmaji's code of non-violence broken now. Gandhiji was arrested but was quite content in jail. Sarojini visited him and was asked to become the leader after Abbas Tyabji was arrested. She immediately went to Dharsana and became the leader of a huge army. At Dharsana she and her followers were stopped and they sat on the road in the blazing sun all the more thirsty because the police baited them with water carts but would not allow them to drink. An American wrote : 'A dusty road.. filled with nationalists resting on the ground about a woman, who sat in an armchair passing away the time writing letters or hand-spinning. Facing her and her followers was an equal number of police, armed with sticks and guns. The police were polite, but they were determined that the nationalists should advance no further in their proposed raid on the Dharsana Salt Works.'[1]

Mr. Webb Miller gives a graphic account of this momentous struggle in his book *I found No Peace*. His admiration was unlimited : 'Sarojini Naidu, the famous Indian poetess is leading a non-violent demonstration against the big salt pans near Dharsna. The nearest railway station is Dungri. It is an isolated spot and you will have to take your own food and water. You'd better telegraph Mme. Naidu to provide transport from Dungri, otherwise you will have to walk many miles. Be sure to take an adequate supply of bottled water, because the water from native sources is unhealthy for white men.'

'Mme. Naidu called for prayers before the march started and the entire assemblage knelt. She exhorted them : 'Gandhi's body is in jail but his soul is with you. India's prestige is in your hands. You must not use any violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist : You must not even raise a hand to ward off blows.' Her words were greeted with wild cheers.'

Mr. Miller says : 'I went to see Mme. Naidu who was directing the sub-leaders in keeping the crowds from charging the police. While we were talking one of the British officials approached her, touched her on the arm and said : 'Sarojini Naidu, you are under arrest'. She laughingly shook off his hand and said : 'I'll come but don't touch me.' The crowd cheered frantically as she strode with the British officer across the open space to the barbed wire stockade, where she was interned. Later, she was sentenced to prison. Manilal Gandhi was also arrested. 'Quick, quick ; pack up your tooth-brushes and come away to the van' 'was Mme Naidu's jesting remark.'

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[1] Quoted in *Women Behind Mahatma*, op. cit. p. 158

A spate of arrests took place all over India and on February 6, 1931, Pandit Motilal Nehru died. This was a great grief to Sarojini. The begining of 1931 however showed a change with the growth of friendship between Lord Irwin 'the Christian Viceroy' and Mahatma Gandhi. Sarojini sailed with Mahatma Gandhi and others in August for the Round Table Conference. Not only did she prove to be the Mahatma's right hand ; but she worked hard for women's rights. After the Conference was over Sarojini travelled on the Continent and then went on to Cape Town with Shrinivasa Shastri. The return of the leaders to India after the failure of the Second Round Table Conference once again led to wholesale arrests. Sarojini was not exempted. She was incarcerated in the same prison as Mira Behn who says that when the poetess arrived a number of conveniences also arrived. She wrote : 'a bed, a dressing table with brush and comb, a wash stand, a bath tub, etc. and even curtains. The matron was quite excited. Then the next day came Sarojini Devi, overflowing with vivacity and wit. She was of course exhausted with all the rush and excitement she had been going through outside, but neither her age nor her aches and pains ever daunted her. Now it was my turn to hear all the news, and there was plenty of it : One was only given the *Times of India Weekly* in Jail, and even that sometimes had news items cut out. So the three or four days we had together was hardly enough in which to hear all the news, stories and anecdotes.'[2]

The ding-dong battle for freedom now continued over the years. In 1942 mass arrests were made over the 'Quit India' resolution promulgated by the Congress. Sarojini was jailed with Mahatma Gandhi and many others in the Aga Khan Palace.

The Aga Khan prison was palatial in its splendour : but this luxurious jail created a feeling all the more claustrophobic. Within its spacious walls were enclosed Gandhiji and his wife

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[2] *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*, by Mira Behn, op. cit. p. 161

Sushila Nayyar, Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Mira Behn and Sarojini Naidu. The Mahatma and his wife were 73 years old.

Mira Behn was previously sent to interview the Viceroy after the 'Quit India' resolution was passed in 1942. She was denied admission. On August 8, Gandhiji addressed a mamoth meeting in Bombay and then returned to Birla House. His friends who were to be later imprisoned with him also stayed in the industrialist's house and Mahadev Desai was called to the phone at midnight and told that Gandhi would be arrested. The police party arrived at dawn of August 9 and took the Mahatma and his party away after a brief prayer. Only Gandhiji, Sarojini, Pyarelal, Mahadev Desai and Mira Behn were taken. Kasturba and Sushila Nayyar were arrested when the former persisted in her husband's work, and was later taken to the same prison.

The convicted travelled by train in which members of the Congress Working Committee were also ensconced, each destined to some prison or the other.

Almost immediately after being incarcerated Mahadev Desai suffered a heart attack and died. The whole party was enveloped in grief and if not for the radiant and dauntless presence of Sarojini who never succumbed to sorrow, they may have all languished in melancholy. Even she at times gave way to an insufferable feeling of claustrophobia, but was nevertheless the life of the party. Mira Behn says: 'None of us, not even Bapu, had realised up to this time of incarceration together in the Aga Khan's palace the full richness of Sarojini Devi's nature. She sparkled with wit and showered her love on all with her motherly nature.

Gandhi, after six months, decided to go on a fast. The public at first were kept ignorant and the small band of freedom fighters lived in fear of his succumbing to his ordeal. Nausea started on the fourth day and Dr. B. C. Roy was sent for from Bengal. By now bulletins were being regularly published under the signatures of six doctors. A crisis took place on February 21 but was surmounted, but when the fast ended even Sarojini felt dejected, She arrived, however, in a mauve sari at the ceremony of the first sip of organge juice and joked with the doctors. But Kasturbas approaching death seemed to overshadow the company.

Sarojini herself fell seriously ill of malaria and was taken out of the palace-prison in a stretcher on March 21, 1943. Mira Behn wrote, 'How much we misssd her especially myself.' Kasturba, still in prison, passed away in her husband's arms in February 1944 almost a year later. The Mahatma was released on May 6, on grounds of health. The battle for freedom was now gradually drawing to an end ogether many sad days of bloodshed and communal tragedy now to follow.

The last months before Independence were little more hopeful. The last years also seemed to augur the end.

Laughter, Colour and Freedom

THOUGH Sarojini Naidu scarcely wrote any poetry after 1917, her songs were by no means forgotten. She gave many recitals in all parts of India, and as her three books of poems published by William Heinemann were now out of print, it was felt that a combined volume of all her poems would be welcomed both in India and the West. This much needed volume of Sarojini's collected poems was produced in America called *The Sceptred Flute* by Dodd, Mead and Co. in 1937 with an introduction by Joseph Auslander. Presenting a copy of this book to her friend Amarnath Jha, Sarojini read out from her letters, 'Of all things that life or perhaps my temperament has given me, I prize the gift of laughter as beyond price.' 'Yes', she continued, 'don't I laugh even at myself ?'[1] This volume was rapidly sold out, and therefore another publication appeared under the same title, *The Sceptred Flute : Songs of India* by Kitabistan in 1943 and a second edition in 1946. All the previous three volumes published by Heinemann were included as in the American edition. The publishers said that they have great pleasure in presenting for the first time in India the collected works of 'our greatest living poet'.

One of the high-lights of Sarojini's life was the sound of laughter which was always heard around her, especially in the soirees she held wherever she went. Friends with whom she stayed readily welcomed all her innumberable admirers who flocked around her and then she would sit and laugh and talk and tell them anecdotes about herself and the great men and women she knew.

Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins writes, 'I remember she told us she had chosen her saree with care that day so that its effects might be like the gleaming of silver moonlight in the dark blue vault of the heavens,—the woman, the poetess and the stage-manager aiding and abetting the demand for justice and equality'.[2]

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[1] *Sarojini Naidu* by Amarnath Jha p. 15

Describing a 'whirlwind' train journey in America, Sarojini wrote to Mahatma Gandhi of the 'diamond white snow regions of the Central Western provinces to the topaz and sapphire sun-lands of the South. Never, I assure you, did the souls of my Vedic ancestors raise such a joyous Gayatri to Surya Deva as I do in the glad home of deliverance of the chilled and suffering tropic bones in my body.'[3]

Once she related a story of an ardent biographer striving to take a little of her time. He travelled on the foot-board of a train and when in mid-station he got into her compartment, she asked,

'What do you want young man ?'

'I want to write your biography,' he replied.

'My biology, certainly not. I tell no one about my biology.'

She playfully called Dr. B. C. Roy 'Megaphone' because he had a booming voice.

Some young boys once went to see her room in the Taj and told her they were seeing the sights of Bombay.

'Do you think I am one of the sights ?'

Stories about her are told by all with love and nostalgic memories. There are few who do not remember her for her kindness and generosity.

And thus the years passed and Sarojini Naidu moved from scene to scene. At last the year of India's Independence arrived and she was asked to be the President of Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, six months before India was set free. As President, Sarojini had also to be the leader of the Indian delegation. The plenary session took place on March 23rd

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2. *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood* by Margaret E. Cousins, pp. 120, 121
3. *Young India* April 11, 1929

at the Purana Qila (Old Fort) in Delhi. A vast gathering was present. A colossal map of Asia formed the back-drop of the rostrum. The procession trooped in headed by the President Sarojini Naidu and Sri Shri Ram, Chairman of the Reception Committee. Pandit Nehru inaugurated the Conference and then Sarojini spoke. She opened her remarks by wondering why a 'mere women' should have been chosen. Her speech was one of the most brilliant pieces of flaming rhetoric she had uttered during her life :

'Comrades and Kindred of Asia,

'You will wonder why a mere woman has been chosen to occupy the great place of honour today. The answer is simple. India has always honoured her women. I am so deeply moved when I behold this marvellous gathering of the nations of Asia, that almost, but only almost, I am stricken dumb. It takes so much to strike a woman dumb.

'I wonder how many of you who have come journeying across steep mountain passes, floating on the vast bosom of many coloured seas, riding amid the clouds of dawn and darkness realise that we stand today, here and now, not only in the heart of Asia, but the very core and centre of India's heart...We have come here to take an indestructible pledge of unity of Asia so that the world in ruin could be redeemed from sorrow, unhappiness, exploitation. misery, poverty, ignorance, disaster and death.

'What has Asia always stood for ? We have read so many things about the deeds of Asia, cruel, barbarous—it all depends upon who writes our history. But there is one thing—it is the most authentic feature of this great continent—that beckons every nation of Asia to come and partake of the common ideal of peace—not the peace of negation, not the peace of surrender, not the peace of the coward, not the peace of the dying, not the peace of the dead, but the peace, militant, dynamic, creative, of the human spirit which exalts...

'And what will Asia do with her renaissance ? Will she arm herself for battles to conquer, to annex and exploit, or rather, will she forge new weapons and re-fashion her armoury in accordance with ancient ideals, as soldiers of peace and missionaries of love ? My great and beloved leader, Mahatma Gandhi, has taught us that not through bitterness and hate, not through anger and strife, but through compassion, love and forgiveness shall the world be redeemed. And this is not a new message. It is an old message of Asia reinforced by the experience, adventure, suffering and hope of the Indian people. By love and not by hate shall the world be redeemed.

'Therefore, India has beckoned to her kindred of Asia to come and understand the new message and hope of the whole world.'

Sarojini was made Governor of U. P. when India became independent. At the swearing-in-ceremony Sarojini stressed the notes of freedom in finest lyrical prose, 'Oh, world of free nations, on this day of our freedom we pray for your freedom in the future. Ours has been an epic struggle, covering many years and costing many lives. It has been a struggle, a dramatic struggle. It has been a struggle of heroes chiefly anonymous in their millions. It has been a struggle of women transformed into strength they worship. It has been a struggle of youth suddenly transformed into power itself and sacrifice and ideals. It has been a struggle of young men and old men, of rich and poor, the literate and the illiterate, the stricken, the outcast, the leper and the saint.

'We are reborn today out of the crucible of our sufferings. Nations of the world, I greet you in the name of India, my mother. My mother whose home has a roof of snow, whose walls are of living seas, whose doors are always open to you. Do you seek shelter or succour, do you seek love and understanding, come to us. Come to us in faith, come to us in hope, come to us believing that all gifts are ours to give. I give for the whole world the freedom of this India, that has never died in the past, that shall be indestructible in the future, and shall lead the world to ultimate peace.

The Last Days

GOVERNMENT HOUSE in Lucknow became now a centre for culture, activity, entertainment and international gatherings. Sarojini Naidu, the gracious and loving hostess set a pattern for Governors to follow in displaying generous hospitality in an exquisitely and artistically kept household.

Sarojini seems to have been happiest speaking in English when she made her many speeches. At a police parade she declared, 'You have heard me speak ungrammatical Hindi; now let me speak grammatical English.' On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 78th birthday she spoke in rhapsody 'Let the whole world honour this man.'

In January, 1948 when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, Sarojini arrived shocked, bewildered and heart-broken at Delhi. The capital was in tears and shattered with grief. Sarojini did not even weep though her face was lined with grief, and she asked in her own brave manner, "What is all this snivelling about? Should he rather die of decrepit old age or indigestion? This was the only death great enough for him'.[1] In her broadcast speech she cried, 'The time is over for private sorrow. The time is over for beating of breasts and tearing of hair. The time is here and now to stand up and say, 'We take up the challenge with those who defied Mahatma Gandhi !'

She went through the strain of the long funeral ceremonies. One of the urns with Mahatmaji's ashes was immersed at Allahabad, and the Triveni Sangam was the scene where the prominent leaders of India paid their last respect to the Father of the Nation. Sarojini Naidu, in order to prepare for the ceremony, left Delhi and received the Asthi special at Allahabad on February 12 together with Pandit Nehru and Pandit Pant. Then the long procession to the Sangam began. The roads were lined with two million people. Before the Cathedral a large choir sang 'Lead kindly Light', Mahatmaji's favourite hymn. Sarojini and the other leaders travelled in a 'Duck' at the Sangam with the urn. It was immersed according to Vedic rites. *The Leader* of February 13 published an exclusive interview given by Sarojini Naidu, 'It was one of the spectacular and splendid functions in the world's history befitting the last rites of him whose name will always illumine the history of humanity with a glory of his gospel of love, truth and non-violence.

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[1] *Prison and Chocolate Cake* by Nayantara Sehgal, p. 220

'The Ganga and Yamuna have been through the ages the classic rivers that have taken into their bosom the ashes of many millions of men and women who sought the final absolution in the united waters; but never in the history of India have the Ganga and Yamuna received the ashes of so glorious a human being whose life and death are an imperishable example for us to reverence and emulate.'[2]

Sarojini Naidu herself was by no means well, and the strain of the Mahatma's passing away and her own arduous duties told greatly on her always precarious health. To Amarnath Jha she had confided that she had a 'groggy heart', high blood pressure, and an injured leg. She reached the age of 70 on February 13, 1949 and the next day she fell ill; but insisted on travelling to Delhi. On the way she hurt her head but was determined to fulfil all her engagements. She returned in four days to Lucknow, suffering from severe headaches and high blood pressure. Complete rest was prescribed. Breathing trouble now commenced and oxygen had to be given on February 18, but she could not sleep even with the help of oxygen. On the night of March 1, 1949 she asked her nurse to sing to her and uttering her last words, 'I don't want anyone to talk to me', she fell asleep listening to the song. She passed away at 3-30 A. M. on March 2. The news reached a stunned nation, steeped in grief. The public streamed to Government House and the funeral procession left at 4-15 P. M. The body, wrapped in a tri-colour flag was carried out amidst recitation of sacred hymns and prayers. Pandit Nehru and others placed it on a gun carriage and her children stood around her. Among the chief mourners were Lady Mountbatten and all the Indian leaders and many ministers. The last Vedic rites were performed and the last post sounded across the Gomati river and and Jayasurya, Sarojini Naidu's eldest son, set fire to the pyre. C. Rajagopalachari delivered the funeral oration. Thus ended the fully lived life of India's illustrous daughter. Tributes poured in and even today the nation mourns the loss of this dauntless woman, poetess, peace-maker, champion of women's liberty, friend, philosopher and guide and a great non-violent fighter of freedom. Many had honoured her during her lifetime for she had received the Kaiser-i-Hind Gold medal early in life for services rendered in Hyderabad, which she returned to the British Government. She was made fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, received the Freedom of the Cities of Madras, Calcutta and Karachi, received the Doctor's Degree of the Allahabad University and many other honours.

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[2] *The Leader*, February 14, 1948

Indo-Anglian Poetry

INDO-ANGLIAN poetry is now about 150 years old, having started with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831). Actually, since the days of Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833) the language had generally grown in India, having fascinated the intellectuals of the country with its liberal views, its rich literature and its cultural tolerance. Henry Derozio's mother was Indian and father Portuguese. His book of poems, the *Fakir of Jungheera and Other Poems* attracted attention and it soon became the fashion for Indians to write in this foreign language. Other poets, rapidly followed. Kashiprosad Ghose was the first Bengali/English poet and a spate of versifiers soon began to sprout, some mere mushroom growths, others, like Toru Dutt, still admired and read. Among prominent early Indo-Anglian poets were Mohan Lal, Hasan Ali, P. Rajagopal, Raj Narain Dutta, and the Dutt family, including Toru Dutt's father and uncles. They produced the *Dutt Familly Album* published in England by Longmans Green & Co. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who was no relation to the poetic Dutt Familly also inaugurated his poetic output in English with *The Captive Ladie* but soon switched to his own language, Bengali, and is now considered one of the classic writers of Bengal. He embraced Christianity in 1843.

In the meanwhile, English was becoming more and more familiar in India. Though officially English became the most important language in India ever since 1835 after Lord Bentinck's rule of Macaulay's Minute, which channelled all educational funds towards the use of 'English education alone' and made the learning of English compulsory ; English actually came to India as early as the sixteenth century with Thomas Stevens (1549-1619), a Jesuit missionary of Goa. In 1817 the Hindu College was started in Calcutta by Bengalis and the British ; this was the first Anglo-Bengali institution in the country. The next year William Carey, Ward and Marshman launched the Serampore College. The great Principals of this day were Dr. Duff and later David Lester Richardson. The latter also edited the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* and his *Literary Leaves* encouraged a number of young Indian Writers to write in English. Such journals as the *Bengal Magazine* and the *Calcutta Review* also sponsored new writing and Toru Dutt wrote an appreciation of Derozio in the latter in 1874 apart from publishing many of her poems in both the journals. Romesh Chundra Dutt, a second cousin of Toru's and a brilliant writer and Indologist then translated the Sanskrit epics into English and thus Indo-Anglian poetry progressed with the years, and was beginning to be noticed more and more. Lotika Ghose, daughter of the poet Manmohan Ghose, wrote a book on Indian Writers in English in 1933 and earlier *The Bengali Book of English Verse* was compiled by Theodore Douglas Dunn and published by Longmans Green in Madras in 1918.

The mere conventional forms of versifying were popular, such as the lyric, sonnet, elegy and ode and when Rabindranath Tagore won the Noble Prize for his *Gitanjali* in 1913 by translating his own poems into free English verse, a new form was opened but continued little by his followers. Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and to a certain extent, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu helped to build their own techniques and the images of Indo-Anglian poetry. 'A particular verbal mode of expressing romantic sensibility may have ended with Sarojini Naidu and her generation. But it does not mean that romantic sensibility itself came to an end.'[1]

There was a great mingling of Western and Eastern thought and literary study in the nineteenth century. Sanskrit was beginning to fascinate many European scholars. The Royal Asiatic Society was born in Calcutta under the inspiration of

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[1] *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry* Ed. V. K. Gokak, p. xxxv

Sir William Jones. Other giant European scholars, many of them German, including Max Muller were bringing the hitherto rich spiritual literature of India almost a century earlier into the forefront at last. Europe was dazed at India's great heritage. John Wilson, Sri Edwin Arnold, Sri William Hunter and of course the scholar-missionaries of the day, David Hare, William Carey, Richardson and others were in their turn avidly imbibing Indian legacies of art and poetry and religious writing.

Then again, Indians did not stop at merely absorbing English and its rich literature. The developed West 'revived the dormant intellectual and critical impulse ; it rehabilitated life and awakened the desire of new creation ; it put the reviving Indian spirit face to face with novel conditions and ideas and the urgent necessity of understanding, assimilating and conquering them'.[2] Bengalis were the first to pick up this impact. Indians also began to criticise the new English culture. 'Even Sarojini Naidu, herself a product of the English speaking system of education, deplored that it 'sold generations of denationalised Indian Youth into a blind intellectual bondage to the West.' But the immense advantages were not ignored. Tagore wrote of 'the large-hearted liberation of the Nineteenth Century'.[3]

A new stream of literature, based on religious, secular, scientific and humanistic subjects now began to flow into India. Indian intellectuals now began also to combine the teachings of Christ and His ideals of love and service with the great Hindu philosophy of the past and Vedic precepts. Raja Ram Mohun Roy had started by abandoning idol worship, for which he was presecuted. He founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828. Many great men furthered this reformed Hindu cult, despite opposition. Social reforms also went hand in hand, such as the abolition of Suttee, the gradual emancipation of women, the awareness of the evils of the caste system and allowing Indians to travel abroad. Of course education began

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2. Sri Aurobindo in *The Renaissance in India* p. 26
3. *Indo-English Poetry* by P. C. Kotoky, pp. 5 & 6

to sprout with new Western impacts.

Devendranath Tagore and Keshub Chunder Sen worked together for ten years and created a strong cult out of the Brahmo religion which Raja Ram Mohun Roy had started ; but Keshub's teachings were based more and more on Christian ideals and forms and emerged as a separate branch from the original Brahmo Samaj. In fact, now there was a split. In 1866 the first parent Brahmo Samaj emerged as the Adi Brahmo Samaj and then into the Shadaran Brahmo Samaj. Keshub Chundra Sen's branch was called the Naba Bidhan. The great intellectuals of the day formed reformed religious cults in other parts of India also, such as the Prarthana Samaj in the West, the Arya Samaj in the North and the Theosophical Society in the South. In Bengal, apart from the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Missionaries started a wide circle of religious teaching and service to the people based on that great personality—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Here was another new magnetic religion. All these new sects believed in condemning no particular religion but respecting and enfolding all religions in their tolerant own creeds.

This was also the characteristic of Indo-Anglian writers. Poets took the English language and moulded it in an oriental setting. Like, Irish, Welsh, Polish, French or any other writers in English, the imagery was that of their country but the medium English. But a criticism of Indo-Anglian poetry is that it has 'visualised mostly the surface or external aspects of life and things. Indo-English poetry has been, for the most part, without much of vigour and it is, to use an expression from Sri Aurobindo, 'the time-element' that rises above 'the eternal' in this poetry'.[4] The themes of the Indo-Anglian poets were mythical, legendary. historical or merely of the experiences of the day. Many played with the new language as if they had found a new toy. They experimented and copied the forms and felt exalted in their use of the English language ; but a great deal of poetry was not of a very high standard unlike that of Yeats, Dylan Thomas and others, who wrote in English but were Irish or Welsh or of other countries.

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[4] *Indian Writing in English* p. 40

In the nineteenth century, the feeling of give and take between the West and East created a new school of thinking, and culture, and Keshub Chunder Sen was the leader of this group. Among his good friends was Aghornath Chattopadhyay, just returned from abroad and replete with zest for reforms combined with a patriotic fervour. He also became a Brahmo of the Naba Bidhan cult and was initiated by Brahmananda Sen himself. Varada Sundari was also an inmate of the Sen family. Sarojini's parents therefore, were early associated with one of the most dynamic groups of awakening India. The tradition in which she was brought up was liberal and tolerant of all castes, creeds and races. She was taught from earliest childhood to believe in East-West comradeship. When she was born in 1879 Indians were possessed with the dream of writing in English and Aghornath passed on this legacy to his daughter. But the background after Aghornath moved to Hyderabad was a mixture of Hindu, Islam and British culture. Mulk Raj Anand remarks that 'although Sarojini had adopted a Western language and a Western technique to express herself, she seems to me to be in the main Hindustani in the tradition of Ghalib, Zok Mir, Hali and Iqbal.'[5] She was a child of the Hindu-Muslim structure of Hyderabad with a strong background of Brahmo philosophy, tolerance and love for humanity. Persian poetry also influenced her considerably. She was also quite English in her outlook. 'Some of her songs are little more than exotically sentimental utterances that might have come from an English Writer who knew the East, by hearsay' says one critic. But Sarojini, I feel, lived and exulted in living in India. Certainly if she had not felt the throbs of drum and cymbal, the lilt of folk-songs ; if she had not heard the street vendor's cries, the boatman's simple philosophy floating across the broad rivers ; if she had not seen the snake-charmer seated playing his weird instrument and the cobras dancing before him or the bangle-sellers and palanquin-bearers, if she had not lived with the glamourous, the exótic beauties of the secluded *Purdah-Nashin* world, and finally if she had not loved and admired the great men of the day of whom she wrote, she could never have produced such exquisite lyrics. It was this romantic world of India which she presented to the English reader, and which she took a great delight in producing. Here was an India of which she was proud, a land in which she exulted and which she adored serving and loving, and this beloved land she would interpret abroad. She did not believe in publicly highlighting her country's faults and its many shortcomings. Why would she ? Poetry was beauty to her—not mere realistic ugly disgusting and sordid attitudes of life. These might be the realities of existence ; but not what inspired Sarojini.

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[5] *The Golden Breath* p. 102 quoted in *Indo-English Poetry* p. 42

India was a conquered country when she wrote, and Sarojini wished to raise the status of her motherland before other nations. She once told my mother that England had reached greatness because they never admitted their faults. Why should we, when we still had to build up our country into a free and forceful land ? Therefore she wrote highly colourful poems of India in English which was, after all India's official language during her timeand is even now, the official language of the Federal Indian Union with thirteen state languages and one national language, i.e. Hindi. Therefore Indian literature in English is a definite part of India itself. England had played a part in India's growth as much as all the previous foreign invaders. Even the Aryan language—Sanskrit was first introduced to India by Aryan invaders, and had now become Indian itself. Greek, Moghul and other influences have always mixed with us. In this lies the greatness of India, and we have never lost our identity with ourselves, never become alien despite writing or speaking in any tongue which India has adopted. Sarojini was a staunch daughter of this aspect of Indians writing naturally and fluently in English. 'Indo-English literature demonstrates the Indian philosophic outlook of unity in rich diversity'.[6]

Any narrow outlook in criticising poets or even novelists because they write in languages other than their mother-tongue should be taken as harmful, for there are many bad poets who have written in their own national languages, and good poets who have chosen other medium. Many so-called English poets also have written bad verse. It is often felt that English 'remains an adventure and a constant source of worry to the Englishman himself'.[7] On the other hand many have pointed out that some Indians often speak purer English than many Englishmen themselves. Many also judge Indian writing in English from a political platform, often not even Indian but merely regional or merely patriotic standards. For instance, we are told that the old poets, i.e. Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and others, were suffering from Anglomania. 'What circumstance led to this inconceivable loss of a mother-tongue ?'[8] But are not modern Indo-Anglian poets suffering from the same mania if not more so ? Besides, there is also a tendency for Bengali-mania, Oriya-mania, Tamil-mania, Hindi-mania and so on. Poetry may thus become more and more regional which is all to the good, provided it can also reach other spheres through worthy translations ; but no one for instance could have been more national or patriotic than Sri Aurobindo or Sarojini Naidu, to quote but a few Indo-Anglian poets. But it also must be admitted that those minor poets who indulge in versifying in English and consider themselves poets should desist from writing. Many have not even a clue as to how to write English poetry.

Finally one wonders whether the label Indo-Anglian poetry, stressing and combining a nation and a language when all art should be free and unhampered was at all necessary. Certainly Sarojini Naidu, a songbird disliking all restrictions of her

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6. *Indo-English Literature in the 19th Century* by John Alphonso Karkala, p. 1
7. *The Swan and the Eagle*, p. 2
8. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, p. 5

freedom, does not seem to fit into the category of Indo-Anglian poets. After all no one calls Yeats an Irish-Anglo poet or Dylan Thomas a Welsh-Anglian poet and so on. Sarojini Naidu was merely herself, an exhuberant, dynamic personality, who overcame pain and sorrow with a healthy outlook on life which hardly even showed any traces of unhealthy inhibitions. Would she be willing to be classed as a part of those who write Indo-Anglian poetry today but who are so different? They often think themselves superior to Sarojini's 'Rum-ti-cum' verses as some of them call her poetry. Well then, let Sarojini and Toru and Sri Aurobindo and all those who wrote in different schools and times be: Let them create their own places in life, but let them not be labelled and docketed so that their freedom is curbed.

Poetry And Philosophy

Sarojini Naidu, quite soon in her career as a poet carved herself a niche in the annals of English poetry, not as an Indian writing in English but as one to whom English came as the most natural medium, and in the knowledge of which she excelled. She was however, no alien to India and wrote about her country with the pen of a pure Indian, a patriotic daughter, who loved her country and was an integral part of her great nation. This point can never be over-stressed ; she was greatly admired by English readers and she still has a place in English literature. Her appreciation of truth especially in the few mystic and symbolic verses she wrote was quickly appreciated and she lives ever enshrined in the *Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse*. Sarojini's inclusion in this volume goes to prove that she did in fact find a place in English literature.

The first of her three poems in the book is :

The Soul's Prayer

In childhood's pride I said to Thee
  'O Thou, who mad'st me of Thy breath,
Speak, Master, and reveal to me
Thine inmost laws of life and death.

'Give me to drink each joy and pain
Which Thine eternal hand can mete,
For my insatiate soul would drain
Earth's utmost bitter, utmost sweet.

'Spare me no bliss, no pang of strife,
Withhold no gift or grief I crave,
The intricate lore of love and life
And mystic knowledge of the grave.'

Lord, Thou didst answer stern and low :
'Child, I will hearken to thy prayer,
And thy unconquered soul shall know
All passionate rapture and despair.

'Thou shalt drink deep of joy and fame,
And love shall burn thee like a fire,
And pain shall cleanse thee like a flame,
To purge the dross from thy desire.

'So shall thy chastened spirit yearn
To seek from its blind prayer release,
And spent and pardoned, sue to learn
The simple secret of My peace.

'I, bending from my sevenfold height,
Will teach thee of my quickening grace,
Life is a prism of My light,
And Death the shadow of My face.'

The metre is far simpler than that of some of her lyrics. Her four syllable lines are all the more forceful because of their simplicity and her rhyming fits in more naturally than in some other poems where they often tumble too profusely over one another. The mysticism in *The Soul's Prayer* is evident. She has actually heard the voice of God. He promises her the secret of His Peace. The Vision is clear. But always it harps around life and death.

In her second poem in the *Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse* Sarojini again seeks the Eternal Peace which will free her from the turmoil and strife of the world :

Men say the world is full of fear and hate,
And all life's ripening harvest-fields await
The restless sickle of relentless fate.

But I, sweet Soul, rejoice that I was born,
When from the climbing terraces of corn
I watch the golden orioles of Thy morn.

What care I for the world's desire and pride,
Who know the silver wings that gleam and glide,
The homing pigeons of Thine eventide ?

What care I for the world's loud weariness,
Who dream in twilight granaries Thou dost bless
With delicate sheaves of mellow silences ?

Say, shall I heed dull presages of doom,
Or dread the rumoured loneliness and gloom,
The mute and mythic terror of the tomb ?

For my glad heart is drunk and drenched with Thee,
O inmost Wine of living ecstasy !
O intimate essence of eternity !

The images are vivid and one can see Sarojini looking out of her window and soaring with the golden oriole into a world drunk and drenched with the 'intimate essence of eternity'. Here is a deep and sincere poem which carries Sarojini into the very heart of the great English mystic poets. We only grieve that she wrote so few of its kind.

The third and last is of another's experience, of Buddha himself :

To a Buddha seated on a Lotus

Lord Buddha, on thy lotus-throne,
With praying eyes and hands elate,
What mystic rapture dost thou own,
Immutable and ultimate ?
What peace, unravished of our ken,
Annihilate from the world of men ?

The wind of change for ever blows
Across the tumult of our way,
To-morrow's unborn griefs depose
The sorrows of our yesterday.
Dream yields to dream, strife follows strife,
And Death unweaves the webs of Life.

For us the travail and the heat,
The broken secrets of our pride,
The strenuous lessons of defeat,
The flower deferred, the fruit denied ;
But not the peace, supremely won,
Lord Buddha, of thy Lotus-throne.

With futile hands we seek to gain
Our inaccessible desire,
Diviner summits to attain,
With faith that sinks and feet that tire
But nought shall conquer or control
The heavenward hunger of our soul.

The end, elusive and afar,
Still lures us with its beckoning flight,
And all our mortal moments are
A session of the Infinite.
How shall we reach the great, unknown
Nirvana of the Lotus-throne ?

These three poems published in the *Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse* and collected from her previous publications are not the only symbolic or mystic verses which Sarojini wrote. In fact her three slender volumes are sprinkled frequently with a deep philosophy of life and other-worldly visions. When in England, she moved freely in the company not only of Symons, Gosse and other poets and critics of the day, but with many of the members of the Rhymer's Club, where perhaps, she learnt to be word perfect, for she certainly acquired 'the verbal and technical accomplishment, the mastery of phrase and rhythm, without which she could not have translated her visions and experiences into melodious poetry.'[1] In fact many were her pilgrimages, visions and dreams to the realms of love, faith, patriotism and freedom. These are spontaneous and intensely passionate experiences written at the mystic moment when Sarojini was carried away by the words which flowed out of her. She did not strive to form a consecutive sequence of poetic thought. She wrote 'short swallow-flights of song' and this was where she was most successful. When she tried to form any philosophical plan as in the *Broken Wing* in "The Temple", and the "Pilgrimage of Love", striving to intermingle the human and divine love of a woman offering herself in utter self-denial, 'she does not convince the reader. Her human passions are apt to become too insistent as has already been shown.

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[1] Indian Writing in English p. 175.

She expresses continually the death wish, but there is not enough depth, as for instance in Eliot's Gerontian.

His words are conversational. He takes the reader into his confidence. Such pictures Sarojini seems to have failed to depict in her dialogue with death. She also has spent her past in 'nothingness' and without 'purpose' but she will not give in, and is determined to achieve her 'destined deed'. When Gokhale once asked her why an 'abiding sadness underlies in all that unfailing brightness' of hers, was it because she had 'come so near death that its shadows still cling to you?' She replied, 'No, I have come so near to life that its fires have burnt me.' But the vivid portraiture of human reality which T. S. Eliot so easily draws is not present here. Sarojini's flights of song are always somehow never quite real in life, though her own wish to overcome life's many handicaps are sincere enough.

2

Sarojini's poems were much appreciated. *The Golden Threshold* was first printed in 1905 and was reprinted in quick succession in 1906, 1909, 1914 and 1916 (twice) by William Heinemann. That so young an Indian girl should produce a best-selling book of poems in an adopted language was a remarkable feat. She was between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six when she wrote the poems published in 1905. 'To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus' was included from this book, in the *Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse*, including her in the list of thought movements and its own chaotic cataclysms. 'It would seem to move on its own rail as the engine moves observing dutifully the same bends and curves'[3] as the rules of English demanded.

3

Sarojini Naidu had a rich field of legends and mythology of the Orient to draw from; but she never attempted narrative verse. She merely presented India in her own inimitable manner to please and enthrall her readers in lyrics. Her frequent recitations often sent her audience into ecstasies of delight, especially her popular lyrics based on folk songs, such as *Palanquin-Bearers*

At times we hear the throb of the tom tom playing from a village nestling in the midst of mango or coconut groves, or the more sophisticated beat of the mridangam and tabla. The fisherfolk are awakened in their villages and asked to go to sea. Perhaps they have been indulging in a feast or a wedding, and the tom tom throbs with their waking :

Coromandel Fishers

Rise, brothers, rise, the wakening skies pray
to the morning light,
The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn
like a child that has cried all night.
Come, let us gather our nets from the shore,
and set our *catamarans* free,
To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for
we are the sons of the sea.

Then she peeps into village huts and sings her Cradle Songs :

From groves of spice,
O'er fields of rice,
Athwart the lotus-stream,

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[3] The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry by V. K. Gokak. p. xxii.

I bring for you,
Aglint with dew
A little lovely dream.

Village customs are portrayed in such exquisite little lyrics which as quickly creep into the privacy of the Pardahnashin's sequestered quarters :

A kokila called from a henna-spray :
Lira ! liree ! Lira ! liree !
Hasten maidens, hasten away
To gather the leaves of the henna-tree.
The *tikka's* red for the brow of a bride,
And betel-nut's red for lips that are sweet ;
But, for lily-like fingers and feet,
The red, the red of the henna-tree.

Despite her oft repeated melancholy, spring is always in the air and flowers and colours and the fragrance of spring or an earth newly washed by rain.

Her imagery is identical with India or with Persia, when she sings of *The Songs of Princess Zeb-Un-Nissa In Praise of Her Own Beauty.*

Omar Khayam influenced her with his images, but she was a scholar in Persian and Urdu and repeatedly brings in images of the Islamic world.

But Sarojini instead of forming a deep philosophy like the Persian or Urdu or Hindi poets, merely satisfied herself with rich metaphors and similes from her fabulous treasure house of poetic sources. Her beautiful lines to Leili compare the moon to a caste-mark in one of her most colourful lines :

A caste-mark on the azure brows of Heaven
The golden moon burns sacred, solemn, bright,

This line alone is so perfect that one wonders to what depths of poetry Sarojini could have soared if she had but devoted all her days to writing it, and to a deeper study of the art she possessed.

4

Sarojini's sense of rhyme and rhythm are almost too overabundant ; but she certainly commands a masterly control over both. Her metres are numerous, and there are few faults in scansion. She likes to introduce anapaestic feet in the middle of iambic measures, and she seldom errs in her melodic cadences. To take but one example, we have :

> Our lays are of cities whose lustre is shed,
> The laughter and beauty of women long dead
> The sword of old battles, the crown of old kings,
> And happy and simple and sorrowful things.

Sarojini also has a magical mastery of her epithets, 'a jewelled beauty of phrase, and her subtle magic of imaginative temperament that makes her illuminate by a single flash of epithet a world of new ideas and feelings.'[4]

But she seemed to have been far too satisfied with her already tried out old forms of writing, and though she created a style and technique which was her own, she remained content with her own over-exhausted forms. Even her themes after awhile became cut and dried, and her ornate adjectives, though they resemble to a point those used by early Sanskrit poets, over-emphasising with almost uncontrolled effusion, a scene, a hero or heroine, a custom or creed, are often cloying and meant to fill in a metrical measure rather than an essential adjectival need. She took little notice of India's legends ; but when she did, she over-exaggerated their heroic qualities.

When the Writer's Workshop produced *Modern Indian Poetry in English* which is an 'anthology and a credo'[5] it admitted six exceptional poets previous to 1947. They were Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sarojini Naidu, R. C. Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Harindranath Chattopadhyay. These poets wrote in English which they chose to be their 'first language', but they were nevertheless, as we all know, a part of India and not alien ; on the contrary they were very true Indians.

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[4] *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, p. xviii.

[5] Edited by P. Lal.

In the above mentioned book, modern poets were asked to comment on the poetry of these six exceptional Indo-Anglian poets. Idioms, forms and phrases were compared, and a manifesto of new poets was made against a background of the old. But somehow the comparisons seem almost 'odious' to use a cliche. The anthology could have been composed without the comparison and I can almost hear Sarojini say, 'but why must I write according to modern standards. I write as I wish to write.'

The redundant familiar words like 'soul', 'spiritual', 'subtle deeps' or 'deathless' of the older School are condemned and we are told that the poets 'enjoy a private party' and that modern verse must be free of this 'slushy stuff', and so on. But when the older poets wrote, their language hinged around these 'soul inspiring' words. Why not leave them alone and just get on with modern poetry ? After all, to appreciate Auden or Ezra Pound one does not compare them with Wordsworth or Tennyson. Each poet writes in and for his own age surely. Sarojini's age was one when she felt the glamour of the East should be focussed. Again, we are told that 'a poem is not a spasmodic burst of a spasmodic emotion, but a delicate choreographic pattern within a state of balanced tension produced in a refined sensibility ; that a flutter of pretty epithets is to poetry what corrosive acid is to mosaic ; that a language's vitality and rhythm cannot be exploited with orgiastic abandon but must be used precisely, nobly and with a sense of purpose.'

But the living cannot dictate to the dead, and in fact older poetry exulted in these so-called faults. Oriental poetry and even Greek is full of similes, metaphors and epithets.

After mere dictatorial 'musts' to poets, direct criticisms of the six old poets are tabulated. Sri Aurobindo is a 'stilted mystic', Sarojini Naidu's 'fire-flies' are too prominent, R. C. Dutt's hexametres were received and established because they were published by Everyman's Library Edition. But his style is deficient in sensibility and 'clumsy and intractable'. Generalising on all the poets we learn that they 'aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India', and so on. But many accusations can also be made against the 'moderns' if the dead could but rise and be allowed to 'compare and contrast'. They would ask, what's new poetry all about ? Why is it so obscure and even obscene. They will be told there is strength in obscurity and there is truth and integrity in each word. Also. the modern poets bring out their personality and the problems of their age in their poems. They 'influence the future development of poetry and language'. The modern poets talk to us and are not cluttered up with poetic rules. They anticipate the devices of younger poets, but do not write merely hinging their verses on passing thoughts and scenes. They live in a starkly realistic age of chaotic fear, uncertainty and insecurity. The six Indo-Anglian poets analysed in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* lived in totally different times and we cannot help but thank them for their poems, which have left a lasting mark on India.

5

Sarojini's similes are all of a dream world—often a sad one. In one of her earliest poems of the past and present she compares the past to a mountain cell where hermit-memories dwell. Looking back on her own past, one sees more of the ivory tower than the hermit cell, for she was still a girl when she wrote this verse. The present is a soul which stands in vague, intense expectancy and anguish of suspense and the future is 'like a strange fated bride.' Also when quite young, she sings of dead dreams—dear dreams must be brunt, for they are dead. She is also weary when she writes her verse. She wants to escape from the world ; but the 'war of the world' is inevitable with its 'strife of the throng'. All these references to sorrows and dead dreams make us realise that Sarojini Naidu had a double personality. The one of iovial enjoyment of the world, for she was hearty and enjoyed life, at least outwardly, to the full, and the other a sad romantic seeker of something which she never seemed to be able to find, and which dissolved into idealistic dreams or introspective wishful thinking. Ill health seemed always to have pursued her, for her pain and delicate constitution were noticed even when she was a teenager in England. But she was always able to conquer the 'sorrow of life with the sorrow of song'. Referring to this early poem 'In the Forest' the Indian Social Reformer said in 1902, that it was full of poetic beauty and that it would seem at least that a successor to Toru Dutt had been found and one too 'whose muse is capable of higher flights than that of a blighted bud. The haunting pathos of these lines belong only to one whom Nature has endowed with the vision and the facuilty divine.' While these words exaggerate the merits of the poet, there is a peculiar trance like quality in Sarojini's poems, a mystic other worldliness and transcendental quality—but these are not sustained, they are to be glimpsed at only in lines here and there—almost purple patches of excellence which the other more conventional and slighter lines tend to eliminate.

No pain or strife are to be spared in her search for the 'mystic knowledge of the grave.' God answers her prayer and will initiate her into 'all passionate rapture and despair'. She will experience joy and fame, love and pain. But this duality of spirit always pulls back Sarojini from being a true mystic—she soars into the realms of dreams be they devine or not, and is back again in life tasting its mortal pains and raptures. It is this duality which makes Sarojini either a very deep character worthy of seeking out the cause of the fire of passion and thirst for transcendental knowledge which ever seemed to burn within her, or causes us merely to dismiss her as a simple lyrical singer of songs being imbued with the intoxication of her own ever cascading words.

In 'Salutation to the Eternal Peace', the duality persists; fear, hate and 'relentless fate' on the one hand and on the other Sarojini cries in ecstasy :

> But I sweet soul, rejoice that I was born,
> When from the climbing terraces of corn
> I watched the golden orioles of thy morn.

Here she is like Tagore who saw revealed in the flash of a moment, eternity ; like Blake who saw eternity in an hour—but Sarojini is always too quickly back in the world and its preoccupations.

Perhaps it is this duality which does not make Sarojini find a place among the greatest poets. She lacks the single-minded devotion of the mystic or classic poet and yet she has lived through the years.

6

The only similarity between Toru Dutt who died before she could really mature her thoughts but nevertheless wrote exquisite and quite immortal verse, and Sarojini who had a lifetime to write but stopped with a number of poems of lovely value, is that both were Indian women and both chose their medium of writing as English. The tragedy of Toru Dutt lies in the fact of 'what might have been' if she had lived longer, and of Sarojini of calling a halt to her own writing at the age of 38 and immersing herself in public speaking and politics. On the one hand Toru Dutt leaves the impression of having been denied endless possibilities of reaching an ever escalating standard of poetic worth, for she was well-read in English, French and Sanskrit and possessed the soul of a true poet. On the other hand, we have the impression that Sarojini reached saturation point in 1917 and that, either due to other occupations or her own realisation that she could not step out of her old style to the new school of poetry, or that her own muse had deserted her and left her without any inspiration. Her further sudden stoppage may also have been due to the fact that her poems were always inclined to be girlish, and now, at nearly the age of 40, she felt she must leave these lyrical outpourings and step on to something more substantial, which in fact she did.

Another similarity between ths two poetesses is that they were both sponsored by Edmund Gosse. To both Gosse wrote introductions. Sarojini has admitted that Gosse 'first showed her the way to the Golden Threshold of poetry', and of Toru Gosse said, 'When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song.'

Both Toru and Sarojini are simple ; but the former is more natural and at the same time more mature, the latter's is conventional and too sing song. Toru did not strive to tell the world about her personal pains and pleasure which Sarojini did despite her being more an objective poet. In such classic verse as 'The Casuarina Tree' and the poem to her father Toru did pour out her inner feelings but otherwise she seldom mentioned the plight and tragedy of her own short sad life.

Observations of nature of the two writers is also different. Toru's description of trees for instance are quite the opposite of Sarojini's who seems always to feel, possibly due to Gosse's advice, that all she described *must* be Indian. To Toru the trees just happen to be Indian—the trees she loves. To Sarojini the trees must be described with an oriental background. Toru said :

But nothing can be lovelier than the range
    Of bamboos to the eastward when the moon
Looks through their gapes, and the white lotus changes
    Into a cup of silver. One might swoon
Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
    On primeval Eden, in amaze.

Sarojini cried in her *Champak Blossoms* :

Amber petals, ivory petals,
Petals of carven jade,
Charming with your ambrosial sweetness
Forest and field and glade,

Foredoomed in your hour of transient glory
To shrivel and shrink and fade !

A critic, with whom I do not quite agree, says that 'nature is to her what it was to Tennyson—a background for the portraiture of human emotions." Sarojini never quite excelled in understanding or revealing human nature. They were always clothed in dreamlike vagueness, of flower petals and bird song and religious symbolism. A human being does not stand out as a living person with his or her manifold facets of an individual born to the joys and struggles of this world. They are effervescent fantasy clothed in flowery epithets and similes. And these ephemeral verses are yet satisfying, intoxicating, mystical and idealistic.

7

Sarojini Naidu's philosophy is far more evident in her speeches, never to be forgotten oratorical masterpieces, which we who had the good fortune to hear her can ever recall. Though the accusation was often made against her that her language was melodic. ornate, fluent and drew the audience into dream worlds of ecstasy, I always felt that there was, in fact a great deal of substance in her words, and also, she always gave us an ideal to follow, There was the moon for us to reach, the sky was our limit, we were to work for the good or a united nation, and further afield, a united world. 'Unity' must be the code word of India. Also, there were reforms to be carried out, evils to be combatted, freedom to be won, peace to be propagated and finally love and kindness to be showered on all castes, creeds and communities. We never, I remember, returned from a speech given by Sarojini Naidu, without feeling as if our mundane lives had at last sprouted wings which would grow with our own enthusiasm and hard work. This last was a motto of hers—to work hard with scarcely any rest or respite at the betterment of humanity.

It was the duty of every man and woman to create a new world of hope and glory.

And thus this undaunted woman lived, worked and passed away in dignified loneliness, striving till the end to dream of her own eternal dreams being fulfilled. We should live 'Not in violence, not in anger, not in revenge, but like true children of the East, patient in courage, enduring to the end, let us form the great army of the spirit, and as the spirit of Harischandra that overcame in the end persecution after persecution, trial after trial of his work, so we too in our generation will prove to the world that the spirit endures, that the spirit is immortal, and that we are worthy to be ancestors of posterity, because we are the true stewards and guardians of the truth.'

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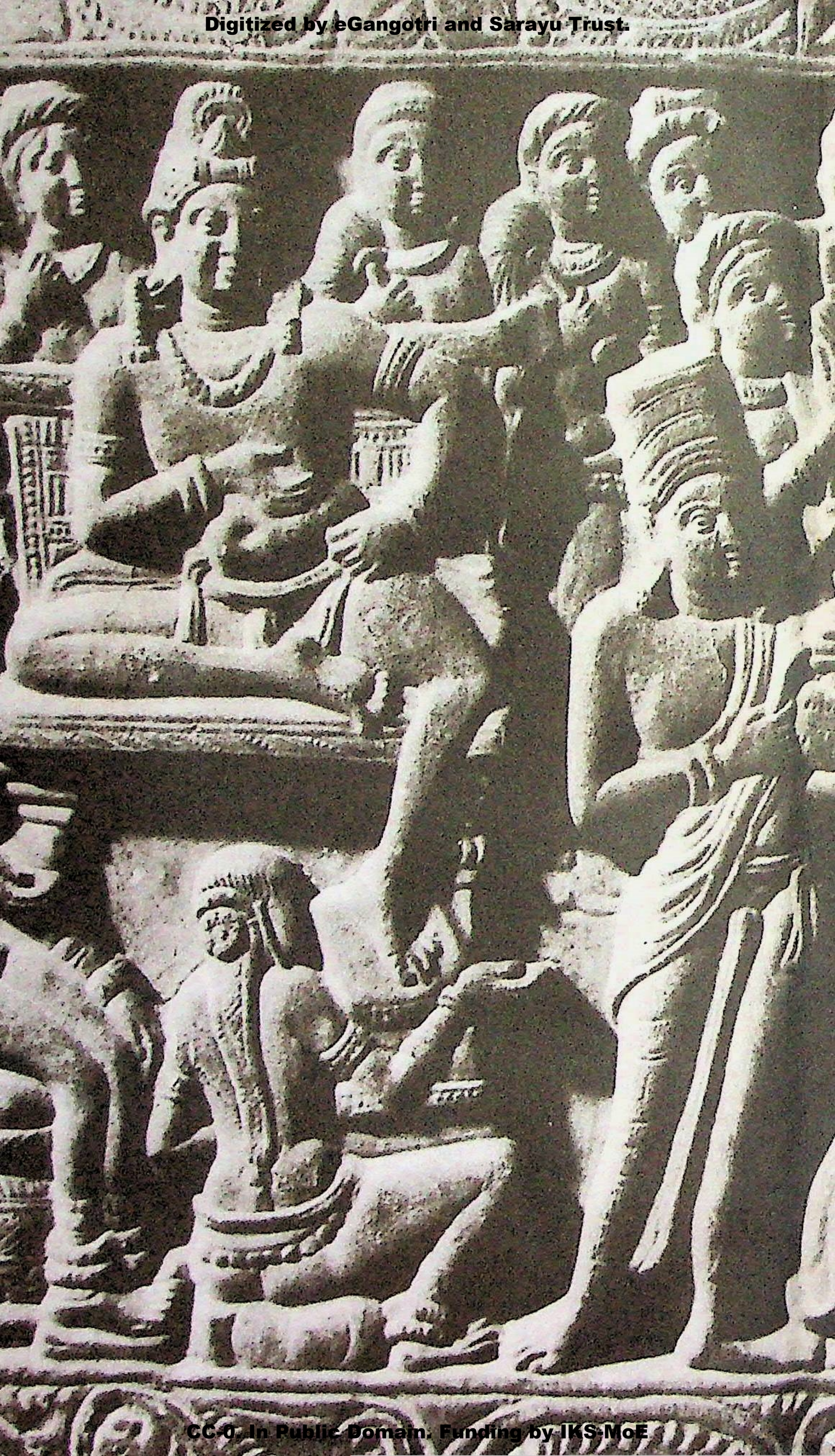

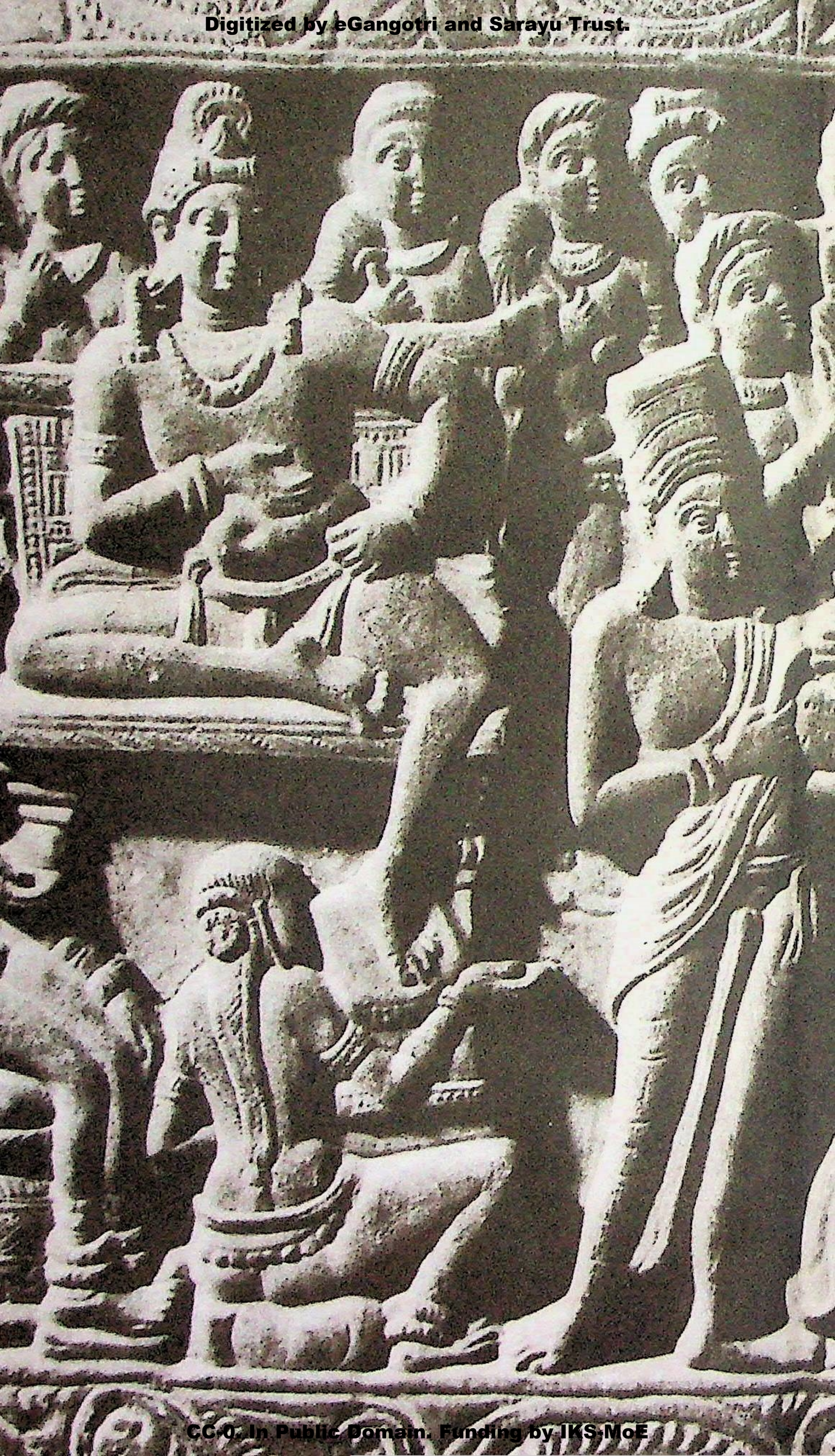

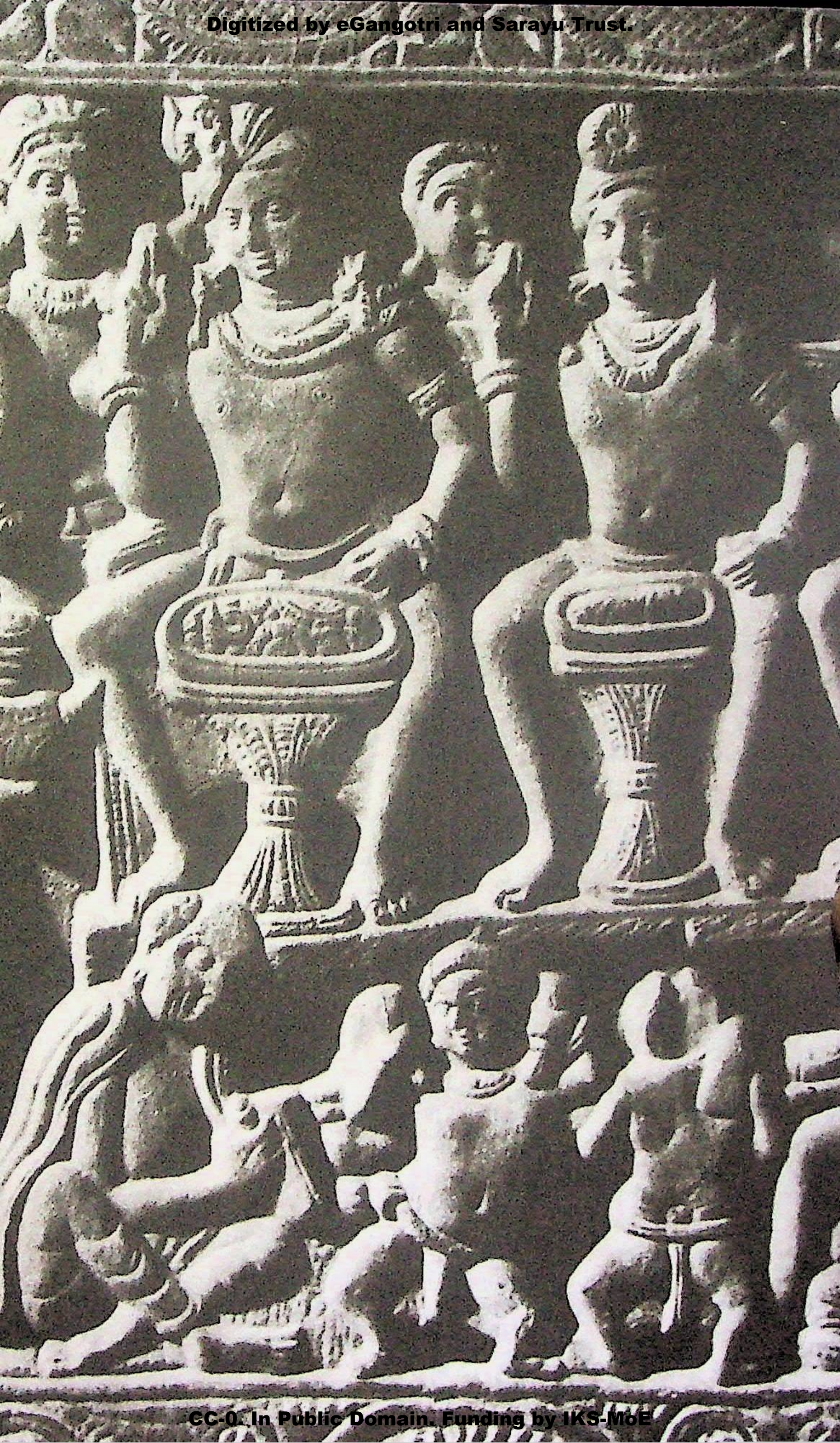

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